

THOMAS J. CHRISTENSEN

WORSE THAN A MONOLITH

Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia



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Thomas J. Christensen



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For Barbara, Theresa, and Will

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WORSE THAN A MONOLITH

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

It should seem obvious that the more united and organized one's enemies, the worse one's own lot. This book makes the counterintuitive assertion that this need not always be the case. Poor coordination, internal mistrust, and intramural rivalry in enemy alliances can be dangerous for one's own side because such internal divisions make engaging in successful coercive diplomacy with those enemies more difficult. During all-out war—pure competitions of brute force—internal divisions and lack of coordination within the enemy camp are clearly to one's advantage. But such wars are the exception, not the rule, in international security politics. More commonplace is coercive diplomacy—the use of threats and assurances in combination to influence the behavior of real or potential adversaries. In such instances it is often more difficult to achieve one's goals at acceptably low costs and to limit the duration and scope of existing conflicts when an adversarial alliance is ill formed, in flux, or internally divided than when it is well organized and hierarchically structured.

This book focuses on the alliance dynamics of Cold War East Asia from 1949–69 and concludes with a chapter on post-Cold War East Asia. The argument of the book is that disunity, lack of coordination, and intra-alliance rivalry increased both the chance that regional conflicts would occur and the likelihood that existing conflicts would persist and escalate. In their formative years, both the U.S.-led alliance system and the Asian communist alliance sent dangerously confusing signals regarding the cohesion, resolve, and intent of their respective blocs. Those signals undercut coercive diplomacy in Asia and created conditions for both crisis and war. From 1958 to 1969 a different phenomenon destabilized relations across the Cold War divide: the ideological rivalry between the Soviet Union and the PRC (“the Sino-Soviet split”) actually harmed U.S. national security interests in Indochina and beyond by catalyzing the two competing communist giants to increase support for revolutionaries in the developing world and to scuttle peace talks to end existing conflicts. This condition changed only in 1969, when Moscow and Beijing turned their guns directly on each other.

The book also provides a brief study of the legacies of U.S. Cold War alliances for contemporary Sino-American relations. Although China and the United States today are very far from being enemies as they were in the 1950s and 1960s, they do engage in mutual coercive diplomacy over issues like relations across

the Taiwan Strait. Certain potentially destabilizing dynamics related to the early formation of the U.S. alliance system in Asia have reemerged, albeit in a more manageable form, as Washington and its regional partners have adjusted to the changes in the global and regional security structure following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

WHY ENEMY DISUNITY AND RIVALRY IS DANGEROUS

This book addresses two forms of dangerous dynamics among enemy alliances: poor coordination and, in the case of revisionist alliances, the catalyzing effect of ideology and the pursuit of prestige on aggression toward enemies.

The first set of theoretical arguments in the book focuses on how weakly formed and poorly organized alliances send signals that can undercut the key components of successful coercive diplomacy: the use of clear and credible threats and assurances in combination to dissuade target countries from undesirable behavior. The problems of coordination and weak signaling explained here can apply to any alliance, whether or not the participants have revisionist goals.

A second set of theoretical arguments is specifically relevant to the study of alliances that were formed with transnational revisionist goals in mind. When such an alliance is first forming and when it is fraught with internal rivalries for leadership, the shared revisionist ideology of the alliance members creates dynamics that make the alliance as a whole aggressive and hard to contain through the use of coercive diplomacy—much more so than either status quo alliances or revisionist alliances that are more firmly established and enjoy clear leadership in a hierarchical structure. In the alliance's formative phase, individual candidates for membership may take unusually aggressive acts toward international enemies to demonstrate that they are bona fide internationalists, not simply nationalists who happen to share domestic political preferences with their potential allies. When there is competition for leadership within such an alliance between two or more members, that competition will often take the form of outbidding rivals by demonstrating support for revolution or revisionism in third areas, thus catalyzing the overall movement's aggression toward the outside world and making containment through coercive diplomacy more costly and more difficult for status quo enemies.

It is important here to make a distinction between coercive diplomacy and the brute force fighting of total wars, in which the central aim is the annihilation of one's enemies, such as World War II and the war against the Al Qaeda network. Such wars are very important but also are, fortunately, quite rare. More commonly, actual or potential enemies are involved in coercive diplomacy (either deterrence to prevent a change in the status quo, or compellence to cause such a change). This is true in peacetime and during limited wars, which constitute

the great majority of armed conflicts and during which opposing sides bargain over the terms of peace through a combination of physical force and diplomatic negotiation. In brute force wars or total wars for survival, disunity among one's adversaries is a clear benefit because it renders the enemy alliance physically weaker. But in the world of coercive diplomacy, threats and assurances must be balanced through a process of clear and credible signaling, and enforceable bargains must be struck short of total defeat or victory for either side. Without credible threats, coercion is obviously ineffective. But what is less well understood is that coercion is also unlikely to be effective without simultaneously transmitted credible assurances that the threat is fully conditional upon the target's behavior and that the target's key security interests will not be harmed if it complies with the demands of those leveling the threats. Without receiving both threats and assurances in concert, the target of a coercive threat has little incentive to comply with the demands being made.¹ Since there is often a tension between these two central aspects of coercive diplomacy, blending threats and assurances effectively is not an easy task in coercive bargaining. Even in the simplest bilateral or "dyadic" relationships, such an effective blend is hard to achieve; but coercive bargaining among adversarial alliances is much more complex still, and the divisions and political jockeying within one or both of the opposing alliances can make such bargaining very difficult indeed. Enemy disunity has two potentially negative implications for one's own security: wars will be more likely to happen because diplomatic solutions to differences short of war will be more difficult to achieve; and limited wars are more likely to endure and even escalate because of the added complexity of intra-war coercive diplomacy.²

¹ For the original theoretical work that specifies the need for both credibility of threat and credibility of reassurance, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966). Also see James Davis, *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). For more recent related work in the rational choice tradition on the importance of two factors—transparency (complete information) and enforceable commitments—in preventing conflict, see James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (summer 1995): 379–414; Erik Gartzke, "War Is in the Error Term," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (summer 1999): 567–87; and Robert Powell, "Bargaining Theory and International Conflict," *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (June 2002): 1–30. In a sense, the alliance politics discussed in this book make alliances both less transparent and less capable of making clear, credible, and enforceable commitments to enemies. Jonathan Kirshner offers an approach that is critical of the recent rational choice arguments that emphasize transparency and credibility of commitment, instead emphasizing the danger of miscalculation in the highly complex world of international security politics, even if actors were somehow to enjoy perfect information and enforceable commitments. In Kirshner's thesis, the alliance politics discussed here would simply add greatly to the complexity of international relations and would, therefore, increase the likelihood of dangerous miscalculations by members of an alliance or their enemies, regardless of the robustness of available information. See Jonathan D. Kirshner, "Rational Explanation for War?" *Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (autumn 2000): 143–50.

² Glenn H. Snyder, "Deterrence and Defense," pp. 25–44 in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, eds., *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics*, 3rd ed. (New York: University Press of America, 1988). Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 2–3.

Alliance Cohesion, Clarity, and Coercive Diplomacy

The first problem discussed in this book is how a lack of coordination and clarity of commitment in alliances renders groups as a whole less transparent to enemies and, therefore, makes it harder for opposing alliances to engage each other in effective, mutual coercive diplomacy. Such divisions and uncertainties, common in the formative stages of an alliance or after major changes in the international system, can create in enemy capitals dangerous misperceptions regarding the capabilities, resolve, or intentions of the alliance, with negative implications for crisis management. Such misperceptions can lead to overestimations or underestimations of the challenge posed by the enemy alliance. The problem is only exacerbated if, as was the case in the early Cold War in East Asia, two opposing alliances (or alignments) are both in a formative stage and, therefore, suffer from poorly coordinated policies and send confusing signals to each other about power and purpose.

When coordination is poor, the most determined and aggressive actors within an alliance are most capable of dragging their partners into conflicts. Poor coordination also increases the likelihood that the alliance will send unclear and misleading signals to adversaries. The inherent complexity of alliances and alignments can be exacerbated by poor coordination among the allies, thus making it particularly difficult for an alliance and its adversary to find an effective balance between credible threats and credible assurances. Especially when poorly organized, alliances can send messages that undercut either credible threats or credible assurances, thus making stable coercive diplomacy with enemies (short of war) harder to maintain than it would be if the alliances were better coordinated and exhibited clearer leadership. What is worse still, in cases where an alliance seems currently weak but potentially strong and aggressive in the future, both credible threats and credible assurances can be undercut simultaneously, significantly increasing both the likelihood of new conflicts and the escalation of existing conflicts.

Poor coordination tends to be prevalent in the formative stages of alliances, when security alliances and alignments are often still informal, mutual suspicions among security partners about each other's near-term and long-term goals and reliability are strongest, and burden-sharing arrangements within alliances have not been clearly delineated. Coordination problems can also arise when the alliance's original mission has disappeared and the alliance must adjust to fundamentally new conditions.

Revisionist Alliance Dynamics and Coercive Diplomacy

The second form of internal alliance dynamics studied in this book is mutual mistrust and intramural competition for leadership in revisionist alliances. Al-

liances with revisionist, internationalist goals can be even more aggressive and harder to pacify through coercive diplomacy when they are poorly formed or rife with internal rivalries than they would be if they were under one actor's clear leadership. There are at least three reasons that this is the case.

First, actors in an alliance, even a revisionist one, often have differing interests. Some will have greater incentives to pursue revisionism and spread revolution violently than other actual or potential partners in the movement. Even if a status quo state and its allies can successfully deter the strongest, leading member of the revisionist alliance through threats and assurances (and this is not always the case), in the absence of a clearly established hierarchy and close coordination within the revisionist alliance, it will be difficult to deter all members of the revisionist alliance simultaneously. Some of the revisionist allies might feel insufficiently threatened and others insufficiently reassured to keep the peace with real or potential adversaries outside the camp. Not only will different revisionist actors interpret enemy threats and assurances differently, but they will often have quite different preference orderings based either on their particular national interests or geographic locations or on their desire to secure or improve their reputations as internationalist actors within the revisionist alliance. For example, revolutionary political movements involved in civil wars in divided countries will have a greater stake in unification of their nations under their rule than will their foreign ideological allies. Among those foreign allies, states geographically adjacent to the sites where local revolutionaries operate might be much more aggressive in support of those local revolutionaries than would geographically more distant states. So, when alliances exhibit internal disunity, the most aggressive actors may be more difficult for their partners to restrain, and aggressive actors may find it easier to drag their more conservative partners into conflicts.

Second, in the formative phases of the alliance, the leaders of a revisionist state will often feel the need to prove to their prospective foreign revisionist allies that they are full-fledged members of the internationalist movement, not merely parochial leaders of "national liberation" efforts. New members of the revisionist alliance might do this by taking aggressive actions toward shared enemies and in support of foreign allies. This revolutionary activity may surpass in intensity the expectations of a state merely acting in its own national interest and may exceed the level of risk considered prudent by other members of the alliance.

Third, once the alliance is formed, member states' concerns about their revolutionary prestige and the competition for leadership of the international movement can catalyze the alliance's revolutionary activity, rendering the alliance as a whole even more aggressive and harder to constrain peacefully through coercive diplomacy than would be a more hierarchically ordered alliance. Competition will often take the form of one or more states attempting to appear the most resolute

in confronting shared enemies and the most active in supporting other revisionists in the international system.³ Internal rivalries within alliances tend to form and become dangerous when the ideology binding an alliance together is transnational and revisionist in nature. Their ideologies—e.g., Marxism-Leninism, pan-Arabism, and militant Islamic fundamentalism—make such alliances prone to intramural competition for leadership. For states attempting to contain revisionist alliances through coercive diplomacy, such rivalries pose real problems. The intramural competition within the revisionist alliance revolves around which ally can prove itself most revolutionary and most resolute in overthrowing the status quo via belligerence toward common enemies. The competition among revisionist actors to appear the most uncompromising toward the enemy will lead to a ratcheting up of revolutionary fervor within the international movement, as more radical members of the movement catalyze the generally more moderate members of the movement into more aggressive activity than we would otherwise expect.

All of these factors can lead to a situation in which tails wag dogs and competitions to induce fervor undercut proposals for compromise raised by the most cautious and moderate capitals within the alliance. For enemies of the revisionist alliance, these problems will persist until the intramural competition escalates into total alliance breakdown and, perhaps even military conflict among the former allies.

There are some reasons to expect that, all things being equal, the strongest and most influential actor in any international revisionist movement will be more willing to moderate its behavior and therefore will be easier than its weaker and ambitious allies for non-allied states to engage in coercive diplomacy. First, such established leaders might simply have more to lose from the escalation of conflict with the enemy than less-established local revolutionary allies, some of whom might perceive themselves locked into struggles to the death with local foes and unable to compromise at least until they win their local battles. Even if the leading state is still highly unsatisfied with the status quo, it might still have a more globally oriented, longer-term, and therefore more cautious strategy than its less-secure, less-experienced, and more locally focused allies. Finally, other states within the international movement that have stronger incentives to improve their prestige and rankings within the movement might also be much more supportive of the most radical local revolutionaries than would the more established leaders in the movement, who should be more satisfied with their position within the movement's existing hierarchy.

³ The ratcheting effect in international revisionist alliances is similar to the competitive bidding for nationalist credentials in immature democracies, as analyzed in Jack Snyder's path-breaking work on democratization and war. Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000), 68–69.

When challenged by upstart rivals in their own movements, leading states in revisionist alliances might have to jettison their caution as they have to worry not only about their reputation for resolve with the enemy alliance, but also their prestige within their own revolutionary movement. They may, therefore, be dragged more deeply into conflicts by their more activist allies than we would otherwise expect. In this sense, from the perspective of achieving peace through coercive diplomacy, all things being equal, rivalries and differences within revisionist movements make them worse than a monolith.

It is, of course, possible that the most powerful leader of the movement could be even more aggressive than its weaker allies. Under such circumstances, of course, coercive diplomacy as a tool to contain such an alliance might be very difficult, if not impossible, for the status quo alliance, regardless of the cohesion of the revisionist alliance. Weaker but more conservative allies of a strong but highly radical leading actor would likely find it hard to restrain their more powerful ally. Large-scale war might simply naturally ensue between the two camps, and we would then leave the world of coercive diplomacy and enter the world of simple brute force, in which splits in the revisionist camp are more clearly to the advantage of the camp's adversaries.

The very nature of some revisionist movements may render moot the problems of coercive diplomacy analyzed in this book. In some senses, the struggle against the Al Qaeda network might be seen as one against a revisionist alliance. But the approach here does not apply to the fight against Al Qaeda because that struggle is arguably much more one of brute force than of coercive diplomacy. Coercive diplomacy is a form of bargaining, even when it occurs among bitter enemies, as it did during the Cold War. A prerequisite of such a bargaining environment is there being at least some potential common ground between the interests of the enemy camps to allow for negotiation. So, despite severe tensions and persistent security competition, each Cold War superpower learned to live with the existence of the other as long as its own survival was guaranteed. This acceptance of an unhappy but tolerable status quo allowed for mutual nuclear coercion, commonly described as "Mutually Assured Destruction," a condition that arguably deterred not only nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, but also large-scale, direct conventional engagements.⁴ It is difficult to imagine Al Qaeda and its many enemies—moderate states in the Islamic world, the United States, Europe, and Israel—finding enough common ground to settle into such a pattern of coercive diplomatic bargaining. Instead, the struggle seems zero-sum, without a readily imaginable bargaining space. Al Qaeda will be satisfied with nothing less than overthrowing its enemies, and its enemies

⁴ For a classic work analyzing this concept, see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

are primarily interested not simply in containing the Al Qaeda network, but weakening it, keeping it off balance and less capable of leveling devastating attacks, and then, ultimately, destroying it.

THE BOOK'S CLAIMS AND THE EXISTING THEORETICAL LITERATURE

The book offers two sets of theoretical approaches toward alliances and coercive diplomacy. Each builds upon, revises, or melds existing theories in the literature.

Alliance Cohesion and Coercive Diplomacy

The first theoretical strand in this exploration of alliance cohesion and coercive diplomacy integrates theoretical concepts about dilemmas of alliance maintenance with arguments about clarity of signaling in deterrence theory. Much of the literature to date has emphasized how alliances are fraught with rather paradoxical ailments: fears of abandonment in time of need balanced against fears of entrapment in conflicts unnecessarily provoked by one's own allies.⁵ But these arguments about alliance maintenance have only rarely been tied into theories about how alliances interact with outsiders in relationships involving coercive diplomacy. One notable exception, on which I attempt to build here both theoretically and empirically, is Glenn H. Snyder's path-breaking concept of "the composite security dilemma." In a book that is largely about internal alliance dynamics, Snyder also argues more briefly that individual allies need to manage simultaneously both their relations with allies and their coercive diplomacy with enemies at the same time (hence the adjective "composite").⁶ Changes designed to shore up alliance cohesion or redistribute burden-sharing within an alliance can have unintended deleterious effects on the alliance's coercive diplomacy toward outsiders.

⁵ For the original formulation, see Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36 (July 1984): 461–95. This theme is developed further in Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

⁶ Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 192–98, 330–55. Snyder's book does not focus primarily on this issue. Some of my arguments about alliance divisions and coercive diplomacy will be very much in the spirit of those sections of his work, but will focus on alliance politics in a very different international context. Snyder focuses on cases of international multipolarity before the Cold War, not the Cold War or post-Cold War periods. Moreover, he focuses on formal alliances in the book while I will also discuss less formal alignments. Another related contribution to the field is Timothy Crawford's excellent book on what he calls "pivotal deterrence" which addresses how third parties attempt to deter both sides in a conflict, often through an ambiguous mix of threats and assurances that keep either party from taking the first step toward disaster. Timothy W. Crawford, *Pivotal Deterrence: Third-Party Statecraft and the Pursuit of Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2003).