

Branislav L. Slantchev

# Military Threats

The Costs of Coercion  
and the Price of Peace



CAMBRIDGE

## Military Threats

Is military power central in determining which states get their voice heard? Must states run a high risk of war to communicate credible intent? Slantchev shows that states can often obtain concessions without incurring higher risks when they use military threats. Unlike diplomatic forms of communication, physical military moves improve a state's expected performance in war. If the opponent believes the threat, it will be more likely to back down. Military moves are also inherently costly, so only resolved states are willing to pay these costs. Slantchev argues that powerful states can secure better peaceful outcomes and lower the risk of war, but the likelihood of war depends on the extent to which a state is prepared to use military threats to deter challenges to peace and compel concessions without fighting. The price of peace may therefore be large: states invest in military forces that are both costly and unused.

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*На дядовците ми, Георги и Петър.*



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# Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	x
<i>List of tables</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<b>Part I Coercion and Credibility</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2 Commitment and Signaling in Coercive Bargaining</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 A Stylization of a Crisis	14
2.2 The Purely Informational Approach	18
2.3 The Search for Credibility	29
2.3.1 Costly Signaling	31
2.3.2 Constraining Future Choices	42
2.3.3 Manipulating Incentives	46
2.4 Conclusion	60
<b>Part II A Theory of Military Threats</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>3 A Model of Military Threats</b>	<b>65</b>
3.1 Characteristics of a Military Threat	65
3.1.1 Military Moves Are Inherently Costly	67
3.1.2 Military Moves Change the Distribution of Power	75
3.1.3 Military Moves Can Reveal Capability	78
3.2 Modeling Military Threats	80
3.2.1 The Technology of Conflict	81
3.2.2 The Military Crisis Game	84
3.3 Threats with Complete Information	86
3.4 Threats under Uncertainty	96
3.5 Conclusion with an Aside on Reputation	116

<b>4</b>	<b>Comparing the Instruments of Coercion</b>	119
4.1	Stability and Expected Mobilization	119
4.2	The Basic Simulation Setup	121
4.3	Comparing Threat Instruments	123
	4.3.1 Functions of Coercive Instruments	123
	4.3.2 Escalation and Resistance	125
4.4	Threats and Stability	127
	4.4.1 Appeasement	127
	4.4.2 Escalation Stability	129
	4.4.3 Crisis Stability	133
4.5	Gaining More by Risking Less	135
	4.5.1 Power, Risk, and Gain in Crisis Bargaining	136
	4.5.2 Why Stronger Types Must Run Higher Risks	136
	4.5.3 Risk and Gain with Non-Military Threats	139
	4.5.4 Risk and Gain with Military Threats	141
4.6	Choosing the Instrument of Coercion	147
4.7	Tying the Knot of War: A Conjecture	150
	<b>Part III Elements of Militarized Deterrence</b>	157
<b>5</b>	<b>Militarization and the Distribution of Power and Interests</b>	159
5.1	Stability and Deterrence Failure	160
5.2	System Militarization and Military Threats	163
5.3	System Militarization and Deterrence	168
5.4	The Distribution of Power and Interests	173
5.5	The Sino-Indian War of 1962	178
<b>6</b>	<b>The Expansion of the Korean War, 1950</b>	191
6.1	An Outline of the Argument	193
6.2	Militarized Deterrence in Korea	195
6.3	The Evolution of US War Aims and Chinese Signals	202
	6.3.1 Liberation without Unification	202
	6.3.2 Unification Becomes a Tempting Possibility	204
	6.3.3 The Closing of the Window of Opportunity	207
	6.3.4 The Chinese Make Up Their Minds	210
6.4	Did the US Irrationally Dismiss Clear Chinese Threats?	214
6.5	Conclusion	221
<b>7</b>	<b>The Price of Peace and Military Threat Effectiveness</b>	224
7.1	The Paradoxical Burden of Peace	225
	7.1.1 Stability and the Costs of War	225
	7.1.2 High War Costs and Aggressive Mobilization	228
7.2	Do Audience Costs Improve the Prospects for Peace?	232

7.3	Deterrent Efficacy of Military Threats: Power or Beliefs?	238
7.4	Bluffs, Sham Crises, and Deterrence	247
<b>Part IV Conclusions</b>		253
<b>8</b>	<b>Implications</b>	255
<i>Appendix A</i>	<b>Formalities for Chapter 2</b>	259
<i>Appendix B</i>	<b>Formalities for Chapter 3</b>	265
<i>Appendix C</i>	<b>Formalities for Chapter 4</b>	282
<i>Appendix D</i>	<b>Formalities for Chapter 5</b>	286
	<i>Bibliography</i>	288
	<i>Index</i>	303

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## Figures

2.1	The Basic Crisis Game	14
2.2	Defender Behavior in the Crisis Game	25
2.3	The Crisis Game with Sunk Costs	32
2.4	The Crisis Game with Randomized Threats	39
2.5	The Crisis Game with Audience Costs	48
3.1	Marginal Effect of Mobilization on the Distribution of Power	83
3.2	The Crisis Game with the Military Instrument	85
3.3	War Preparation, Coercion, and Assured Compellence	107
3.4	Over-Mobilization to Establish Credibility	111
4.1	Coercive Instruments and Appeasement	128
4.2	Coercive Instruments and Escalation Stability	130
4.3	Coercive Instruments and Crisis Stability	133
4.4	Type-Dependent Mobilization and the Distribution of Power	142
4.5	Type-Dependent Expected Probability of War	143
4.6	Type-Dependent Expected Payoff	144
4.7	Coercive Instruments and Expected Payoff	148
5.1	System Militarization and Mobilization Levels	164
5.2	System Militarization and Crisis Stability	167
5.3	System Militarization and General Deterrence Failure	169
5.4	System Militarization and Conditional Crisis Stability	170
5.5	System Militarization and Situation Stability	172
6.1	The Military Threat Model and the Korean War	200
7.1	Stability and War Costs	226
7.2	Defender's Mobilization and War Costs	229
7.3	Stability and Audience Costs	233
7.4	Defender's Mobilization and Audience Costs	235
7.5	Distribution of Power and Selection Effects	240
7.6	Mobilization Levels and Balance of Interests	243
7.7	Bluffing by Both Actors	248
B.1	Optimal and Minimum Credible Militarized Allocations	269

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## Tables

4.1	Functionality of Coercive Instruments	124
6.1	The Korean Conflict: Parameters for the US and the PRC	196

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It now occurs to me that more people may have read the manuscript than are likely to read the finished product! None of them is responsible for any remaining errors. I suppose these could be my fault.

I would also like to thank my cats but I don't have any.

# **Part I**

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## **Coercion and Credibility**



# 1

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## Introduction

*Preparation for war does not make war inevitable. On the contrary, prudent preparation for war, accompanied by a wise policy, provides a guarantee that war will not break out except for the gravest of reasons.*

*Count Sergei I. Witte*

Military power is what gets one's voice heard in world affairs. Creating and maintaining armed forces is among the costliest undertakings for a nation short of their employment in hostilities. Even a casual glance at history reveals that whatever their defensive role is, armed forces are often used to menace others. More often than not, they are used indirectly, as an implicit or explicit presence in the background of negotiations, rather than directly in fighting.<sup>1</sup> States frequently find themselves on the opposite sides of disputes, and in their attempts to wrangle concessions out of each other they sometimes resort to military threats. The threat to use force can be verbal without any overt preparation to do so, or physical with all the measures – putting forces on alert, recalling reservists, mobilizing, dispatching the navy, deploying troops – required for its actual use. These physical measures, which I collectively refer to as *military moves*, do not have to be accompanied by an explicit warning. They are so menacing that the threat of hostile intent is implicit in their use. Sometimes these moves are nothing but necessary steps on the road to war. But more often, they are intended as a warning that war may come unless the adversary accedes to one's demands. War, with its enormous costs, pain, and risks, is not something to be contemplated lightly. But there are things worse than war and common sense dictates what history reveals: even state leaders who are averse to war can deliberately risk it to convince others to bend to their wishes.

It is the function of military moves as instruments to induce desired behavior in others, rather than their proper application in the deadly arts of destruction, that interests me. This is a book on military coercion. It is a

<sup>1</sup> Goldhamer (1979, 9); Karsten et al. (1984, 3–5); Naroll et al. (1974, 1–2); Schelling (1966); Blechman and Kaplan (1978); Young (1968).

study of how military threats can be employed in the pursuit of political goals. For a military threat to succeed as a coercive device, it has to accomplish two objectives: (a) it has to persuade the opponent that one is sufficiently likely to resort to violence if one's demands are not met, and (b) it has to render fighting sufficiently unpleasant for the opponent relative to the concessions demanded. What makes military threats effective? Why might they fail even if they are believable? Why would an actor forego the possibilities of militarized diplomacy and opt for war instead? How are military threats different from other instruments of coercion? These are all questions I address in this book. Although my interest is primarily theoretical, I will draw upon numerous historical cases to motivate the research and illustrate the logic of its findings.

The fundamental result is that military threats can be very effective tools of coercion. They can establish intent to wage war and can communicate that fact to the opponent in a way that he will believe it. Military threats can even reduce the likelihood that the confrontation will end in war, relative to other coercive instruments. Unfortunately, these threats also tend to be expensive, especially if their intent is to coerce the opponent rather than wage war. Whereas this may discourage their use and thereby reduce the chances of a militarized dispute, it may also convince leaders that it is easier to settle the matter by force instead of trying to coerce the opponent with threats. This makes war more likely and underscores the need to distinguish between military moves that are a prelude to war and those that are designed to influence the opponent's behavior. These, as Count Witte observed, are not quite the same even though they may take similar outward appearances.<sup>2</sup>

The findings have implications for international relations theory and policy. On the theoretical side, the results contradict a long tradition of arguing that nations with more powerful militaries tend to get their way more often than others but at the cost of having to risk war more often too. This may be so for non-military instruments but not for military threats. Through the judicious use of military threats, powerful states can secure better peaceful outcomes and lower the risk of war. Their task can be made more difficult if they misperceive the magnitude of the stakes for their opponent. Their overconfidence may prove to be their undoing if they fail to muster the resources necessary to coerce a determined adversary. However, even if they are pessimistic, their actions may make war more likely because they mistakenly believe that it would take too much effort to coerce the opponent

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Witte made this remark about the preparations right before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 (Harcave, 1990, 308–09).

and opt for war instead. In fact, the finding that the overall danger of war is mediated through the distribution of interests can help explain why attempts to link it directly to the distribution of power have generally failed. The likelihood of war depends on the extent to which one is prepared to use military threats to deter challenges to peace and compel concessions without fighting. The price of peace may be military establishments that are both costly and unused. These armed forces are not useless, for their employment is indirect but nevertheless crucial.

I am more reluctant to draw conclusions with policy implications because no one is more acutely aware of the shortcomings of my theories than I am. However, even I cannot resist a couple of observations. Despite the attractiveness of the military instrument as a tool for coercion, one cannot have militarized coercion on the cheap. Gunboat diplomacy is unlikely to work unless it represents firepower that can make a difference in an actual engagement. In other words, military threats cannot be token in character if they are to succeed. They are not a cheap way for the powerful to throw their weight around. In fact, wealthier and more powerful nations may have to engage in relatively more aggressive behavior in order to make their threats stick. They may have to mobilize overkill capability compared to the issues at stake. Shooting flies with an elephant gun may well be the prudent thing for them to do.

The argument in this book depends on a series of theoretical models which all share the same basic assumptions. In this, they all stand or fall together, so it may be worthwhile to provide some justification for the choices I have made. I assume that a conflict of interest exists between two unitary rational actors who confront each other once to resolve it. A number of important assumptions are already buried in this simple statement.

I assume that the two actors are unitary and rational; that is, they behave as individuals with well-defined preferences. By “well-defined” preferences I mean that the actors can rank-order all the various possible outcomes of their interaction in a logically coherent way. More importantly, they can rank-order risky alternatives. For instance, suppose an actor is confronted with an ultimatum from his opponent and, for simplicity, suppose he has three options at his disposal: agree to the terms, launch a preemptive attack, or let the ultimatum expire to see if his opponent will attack. To decide on the best course of action, the actor must evaluate the likely consequences of the various options at his disposal. Capitulation to the opponent’s demands avoids war but (presumably) imposes political and economic costs by forcing the actor to agree to unpalatable conditions. Launching a preemptive strike means going to war, with all the attendant risks and costs. There is no guarantee of victory but there is a chance to