Coercion with Restraint: China and
Extended Coercive Diplomacy

Dong Wang
School of International Studies
Peking University

On April 10, 2012, sailors from the largest warship of the Philippine navy boarded Chinese fishing boats anchored in a lagoon at the Huangyan Island (or the Scarborough Shoal), a reef that is located in north of the Nansha (or Spratly) Islands and in dispute between China and the Philippines, and attempted to arrest the Chinese fishermen on allegation of “illegal fishing”. The Pilipino attempt, however, was thwarted by two Chinese maritime surveillance ships which intercepted and positioned themselves between the Philippine navy ship and the Chinese fishing boats. The encounter triggered a two-month standoff between Manila and Beijing. Beijing’s restraint in responding to the Philippines by merely deploying civilian maritime-enforcement forces to compel Manila to back down was widely noted and dubbed “small stick diplomacy” by security analysts. In fact, China was practicing coercive diplomacy, or “forceful persuasion”—as Alexander George puts it, during the standoff.

The use of coercion strategy to get others to comply with one’s demands is a common practice in human affairs as well as international relations. Strategists and statesmen have for centuries employed coercive diplomacy—defined as the attempt to compel a target to change its behavior through the threat to use force or the actual limited use of force—to achieve strategic and political aims. As scholars note, the United States has throughout international history repeatedly resorted to the coercion strategy. For instance, U.S. coercive pressure on North Vietnam to compel Hanoi to cease its campaign to take over South Vietnam and to come to negotiation table or U.S. efforts to coerce North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapon programs are just two notable cases.

However, what distinguishes China’s standoff with the Philippines over the Huangyan/Scarborough from other cases of coercive diplomacy is the involvement of a third party, the United States, which is allied with the Philippines, in the game. The presence of a third party—a big power that is allied with the targeted adversary—has transformed the dynamics of conventional coercive diplomacy. Among other things, the coercer would have to exercise more caution and restraint lest prompting the third party to throw its weight behind the adversary, with which the third party is bound by either an alliance treaty or other forms of security commitments.

Despite the fact that scholars have developed and refined understanding of coercive diplomacy over the years, there is little study to date in the literature regarding coercive behavior involving a coercer vis-a-vis an adversary allied with or supported by another big power, a triangular scenario which might be called “extended coercive diplomacy”. Introducing a third party into the conventional coercive diplomacy will make the game more complicated, but also all the more interesting. It opens new
theoretical realm that has yet been explored and raises important theoretical questions that have not been addressed before. How does extended coercive diplomacy differ from conventional coercive diplomacy? How would a state coerce an adversary allied with another big power? What are the characteristics of extended coercive diplomacy? What are the conditions that will affect the success or failure of such kind of coercive strategy? What are the limitations in pursuing “extended coercive diplomacy”? These are important theoretical questions one has to ask if we want to gain a better theoretical understanding of extended coercive diplomacy.

As the Huangyan/Scarborough standoff shows, China’s employment of coercive diplomacy presents a new type of strategic and policy dilemma for the United States: Washington has to walk a delicate balance between deterring China without emboldening the Philippines, and reining in the Philippines without weakening U.S. credibility in alliance commitment. Understanding the dynamics of the game of extended coercive diplomacy as well as the logic of China’s behavior in such a game thus becomes important for ensuring U.S. foreign policy goals. Likewise, for Chinese policy makers, understanding the logic of the adversary’s (the Philippines) and the third party’s (the United States) behaviors, as well as efficient bargaining strategies of extended coercive diplomacy and its limits are of crucial importance of the pursuit of China’s strategic and security interests.

In an extended coercive diplomacy scenario, the coercer would, in principle, have to at the minimum, try to “neutralize” the third party and, at the maximum, try to “enlist” the “help” of the third party to put pressure on the adversary.

In an extended coercive diplomacy scenario, the coercer would put more emphasis on seeking common interests with the third party because all other things being equal, the latter will likely determine the outcome of the tripartite game. The coercer would have to put up enough pressure on the targeted adversary to compel it to change behavior through threat to use of force or actual limited use of force without actually resorting to war, but not overdo it. The tricky part is that the coercer would have to put just enough but not excessive pressures on the targeted adversary. Excessive pressures might reduce the “overlap” of common interests between the coercer and the third party, and force the third party to decide to throw its weight behind its client, because of the treaty obligation or security commitment between them, thus significantly changing the correlation of force in the game.

Bargaining Strategies of Extended Coercive Diplomacy

To prevail in extended coercive diplomacy and, especially, to influence the third party’s behavior, the coercer would employ a number of negotiation strategies in the game. Below I identify six strategies that a coercer might employ in pursuing extended coercion.

1) To Drive a Wedge-Type 1 (To Portray the Third Party as Unreliable)

The coercer can try to split the targeted adversary and the third party by driving a wedge between the two. It can achieve that goal by pursuing two types of driving-a-wedge tactics. In Type 1, the coercer can try to convince the adversary that the third party is unreliable and therefore eroding the adversary’s faith in the third
party’s commitment and reducing the adversary’s incentives to resist against pressure from the coercer.

2) To Drive a Wedge-Type 2 (To Portray the Adversary as Irresponsible)

An alternative way of “driving a wedge” (or Type 2) between the adversary and the third party is to portray the targeted adversary as provocative, irresponsible, and dangerous. By convincing the third party that the targeted adversary is reckless, the coercer would increase the third party’s incentive to “rein in” its client and pressure it to change behavior. And this is precisely what Beijing did during the 2012 Huangyan Island/Scarborough Shoal standoff.

3) To Make the Costs of the Third Party Unbearable

The coercer can try to increase (or threaten to increase) the costs of the third party to the extent that they becomes unbearable, thus reducing the third party’s incentives to interfere on behalf of the targeted adversary.

The coercer can do so by directly increasing the costs for the third party to intervene on behalf of the targeted adversary through deterrence. This is what Beijing did during the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis when it issued an implicit nuclear threat against Washington—a Chinese senior military official told U.S. official that he believed the U.S. “would care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan”. The challenge for the coercer, of course, is how to make such a deterrence threat credible. Unfortunately, for China in this case, U.S. policy makers were incredulous about such an implicit nuclear threat.

The coercer can also choose to indirectly increase the third party’s costs of inaction. When the North Korea nuclear crisis was unfolding in late 2002 and early 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush tried to pressure Chinese President Jiang Zemin to persuade China’s de facto ally, North Korea, to abandon its nuclear weapons program and come to the negotiation table. After an initial futile attempt in October 2002 to urge Jiang to use China’s influence to rein in North Korea, Bush impressed Jiang by issuing a warning in January 2003 that he would not be able to stop Japan from going nuclear and again a month later that he would have no choice but to “consider a military strike against North Korea”, if North Korea’s nuclear ambitions cannot be curbed. The Six Party Talks took place in Beijing six month after Bush issued the second “threat”. Clearly, Washington succeeded in “persuading” Beijing to put pressure on Pyongyang to come to the negotiation table by raising China’s costs of inaction to the extent that it becomes intolerable to bear.

4) To Provide Positive Inducements to the Third Party

Theorists of coercive diplomacy have emphasized the importance of “carrot and stick” strategy—combing compellent threats with positive inducements and reassurances, in practicing coercive diplomacy. The positive inducements can range from genuine quid pro quo to face-saving concessions. In addition, discontinuance of a punitive action can also be regarded as a form of positive inducement. In extended coercion, the coercer can try to alter the third party’s calculus of cost and benefit not
only by increasing the costs of its intervention or inaction, but also by increasing the third party’s expected utility of “cooperation” by provision of positive inducements.

The Sino-American rapprochement is a typical example. The Nixon administration tried to incentivize Beijing to help end the Vietnam War by actively pursuing rapprochement with Beijing and offering to help China to counter the Soviet threat, which can be considered as positive inducements for the third party and patron, Beijing, to put pressure on Hanoi to come to the negotiation table. Indeed, Beijing’s efforts to try to “persuade” Hanoi to enter negotiations created bitterness, suspicion and a sense of betrayal on the North Vietnam side, and became one of the factors that contributed to the deterioration of relations and the eventual break-up and bloody border wars between Beijing and Hanoi.

As U.S.-China ties have been growing rapidly since the normalization of bilateral diplomatic relations in 1979, the costs for the United States to go into conflict with China have increased dramatically. Simply put, for the United States, there is now more to lose in destabilizing U.S.-China relations than before. Not only so, the “complex interdependence” between China and the United States also introduces the possibility for China to provide positive inducements to the United States through “issue linkage”. For instance, since the outbreak of the China-Japan standoff over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, some Chinese analysts have advocated the idea of a “grand bargain” that follows the logic of issue linkage: China pressuring North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons programs in exchange for U.S. help to “rein in” Japan on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands disputes.

5) Tying the Coercer’s Hands (or Relinquishing the Initiative to the Third Party)

As Schelling reveals in the classic *Arms and Influence*, to prevail in conflict situations would oftentimes require maneuvering ourselves into a position where “the initiative is up to the enemy and it is he who has to make the awful decision to proceed to a clash”. We can do so by “relinquishing the initiative to the other side” or “leav[ing] the other the ‘last clear chance’ to stop or turn aside” The coercer, when practicing extended coercive diplomacy, can try to convince the third party that its hands are tied, and that if “cornered”, it would have no choice but to resort to actions that will damage interests of all parties. By tying its own hands, the coercer relinquishes the initiative to the third party and therefore increases the third party’s incentives to compromise and step in to “rein in” the targeted adversary. During the 1962 Taiwan Strait crisis, Beijing tried and successfully convinced Washington that the latter should rein in Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek)’s efforts to launch a massive “counter-attack” of the Chinese mainland; otherwise, Washington would be enveloped into a conflict with Beijing that neither wanted to be in. Again, during several cases of crisis over the Taiwan Strait since the end of the Cold War, Beijing had repeatedly tried to pressure Washington to “rein in” Taipei by sending the signal that it might be forced to use force to reverse any course of inevitable moving toward Taiwan independence.

6) To Re-adjust the Coercer’s Goals of Coercion

It will be of vital importance for the coercer, if it were to prevail in an extended coercive diplomacy scenario, to prioritize its interests and goals in a way that is not
diametrically opposed to the interests of the third party. The coercer might seek to increase the overlap of common interests between itself and the third party by re-adjusting its goals of coercion if it finds out that such goals become untenable or counter-productive in bringing unfavorable consequences. As George notes that the coercer may “stiffen or dilute” its demands; coercion, being a strategic and foreign policy instrument, can either escalate into war or de-escalate or simply be dropped. To re-adjust one’s initial goals of coercion might not necessarily constitute failure of extended coercive diplomacy because scaling-down of one’s demands on the targeted adversary may increase the space in which the coercer and the third party can find their interests overlapped and thus be willing to accept a negotiated settlement.

**Predicting the Success of Extended Coercive Diplomacy**

In the context of extended coercive diplomacy, however, there are a few other variables that are critical in shaping the behavior of the third party as well as the coercer and, thus, determining the outcome of the game.

1) **Overlap of common interests between the coercer and the third party**

The greater the overlap of common interests between the coercer and the third party, the more incentive the third party will have to put pressure on the targeted adversary and help “rein in” its ally or client. I consider this factor as the most important one in explaining the success or failure of extended coercive diplomacy.

On the other hand, if the coercer chooses a too “expansive” goal of coercion—particularly, if the coercer chooses to simultaneously coerce both the targeted adversary and the third party—it is most likely than not that the third party will decide to throw its weights behind its client to help resist the coercer’s compellent threats, since now the common interests between the coercer and the third party have evaporated and the strategic relationship between the two is defined by conflict. This is precisely why Beijing foundered in its coercive attempt in the 1954-1955 Taiwan Strait Crisis when it tried to compel both Taipei and Washington to not sign a mutual defense treaty.

2) **Strength of security ties between the targeted adversary and the third party**

The stronger security ties between the target and its patron, the third party, the more likely that the third party will be resistant to the coercer’s pressure, and thus reluctant to pressure its client to back down. On the other hand, all else being equal, the weaker the patron-client relationship between the third party and the targeted adversary, the less constraint the third party will be facing when it chooses to put pressure on its client.

3) **Power asymmetry between the coercer and the third party**

The greater power asymmetry between the coercer and the third party, the more likely the third party will bring its power to bear to resist the coercer’s pressure to “pressure” its ally or client to change behavior. Power asymmetry alone, however, does not explain the success or failure of extended coercive diplomacy. Indeed, even if power asymmetry remains substantial, increase in the overlap of common interests between
the coercer and the third party might still incentivize the third party to come out and pressure its ally or client to change behavior.

4) **Power disparity between the coercer and the targeted adversary**

George cogently points out that great military capability does not guarantee the success of coercive diplomacy since the militarily weaker target might be “strongly motivated by what is at stake and refuse to back down”. However, relative power (as measured by military and economic capabilities) matters in extended coercive diplomacy, but in a way that is somewhat counter-intuitive. The greater power disparity between the coercer and the targeted adversary, the more likely that the coercer would exercise caution and restraint in practicing extended coercive diplomacy. The huge power advantage the coercer enjoys would leave no doubt in the mind of everyone that the coercer could easily prevail in any military conflict should coercive diplomacy fails, which, ironically, would enable the coercer to rely less on the compellent threats and to exercise more caution and restraint. As power disparity shrinks, however, the coercer would have to increase the credibility of its compellent threat through demonstration of more “recklessness” or manipulation of risk.

During the Huangyan Island/Scarborough Shoal standoff, the enormous power disparity China enjoys means that it can afford to rely on “small stick”—civilian maritime patrol vessels—instead of naval force, to engage the Philippine naval warship. When China signaled its strong motivation by defining maritime disputes as “core interest”, the vast power gap indeed allows China to exhibit caution and restraint without the need to communicate its resolve through the explicit threat to use force or actual limited use of force.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has outlined a preliminary theoretical framework for understanding the logic of extended coercive diplomacy. I test some of the propositions I develop by looking into the cases of the PRC’s practices of extended coercion strategy. Particularly, the paper examine the coercer’s bargaining strategies in practicing extended coercive diplomacy, and discuss the conditions for success in pursuing extended coercion. The paper finds out that the overlap of common interests between the coercer and the third party is the most important factor in explaining the success of extended coercive diplomacy.

The logic of extended coercive diplomacy, however, is not limited to China’s experiences. The theory of extended coercive diplomacy indeed applies to any cases involving a coercer trying to coerce a targeted adversary which is an ally or client of a third party. Future researches can continue the theory development by looking at non-China cases.