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Review by **Doreen Horschig**, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

In this article Wyn Bown, Jeffrey Knopf, and Matthew Moran examine Syria’s possession and use of chemical weapons (CW) and third-party response. In this context, they assess how compellence succeeded in Syria when deterrent efforts had initially failed. President Barack Obama had set a ‘red line’ that signaled U.S. commitment to punish the Syrian regime if it used CW. Although the president did not follow through on his deterrence approach, the Syrian regime agreed to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) after its attack on Ghouta in August 2013 that killed hundreds of people.¹ The destruction of a sizable portion of its CW stockpile followed. However, the Bashar al-Assad regime ordered additional CW attacks that included the use of chlorine and sarin agents from 2014-2018, some of them on a large scale. The authors ask why compellence succeeded after the easier task of deterrence had failed? Based on the case study and existing literature,² the authors identify conditions of effective and ineffective coercion.

Conventional wisdom assumes that it is generally easier for a state to deter rather than compel.³ After all, deterrence is less provocative and incurs little cost while compellence requires some form of commitment. In addition, the targeted state can ‘save face’ under deterrence by pretending that the threat had no impact on its behavior. Yet, the Syrian case

¹ Åke Sellström, Scott Cairns and Maurizio Barbeschi, “Report of United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus on 21 August 2013,” *United Nations*, September 13, 2013, <https://undocs.org/A/67/997>.

² See for example, William W. Kaufmann, *The Requirements of Deterrence*, (Princeton: Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 1954); Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics,” *International Organization* 69:2 (2015): 473-495, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818314000393>; Van Jackson, *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

challenges this theory. Kudos to Bowen, Knopf, and Moran in analyzing such a deviant case and challenging the familiar 'resolve plus bomb' formula.⁴

The authors fully acknowledge that the distinction between compellence and deterrence is not always clear. With the help of seminal theoretical works from both fields,⁵ they identify a common analytical framework and challenge the notion that credibility can be measured in absolute terms, explaining that it is more so a question of degree. Hence, they propose several conditions for coercion to be successful (828): credibility of threat, domestic regime-survival motivations, and threats with assurances. They argue that three factors compelled Syria into an agreement in 2013: a credible, coercive threat - Russia perceived the Ghouta attack as a breach of the 'red-line' threshold and perceived the U.S. military threat to be more credible-, an increased risk to Assad's survival if Washington launched its military operations, and Russian participation, which provided Assad with the assurance that there would be no regime change if he complied.

The authors explain with great diligence and clear analysis why Obama's coercive efforts failed in 2012. First, there was a lack of extended deterrence and signaled resolve in the past. The Obama administration set a vague threshold for its 'red line' (814-5)⁶ and did not convey a credible threat. Further, Assad feared an overthrow by internal forces and prioritized domestic survival using CW as force multiplier (818-9), disregarding external pressure. Lastly, Assad did not believe that the United States would not want a regime change (820) as President Obama did not seem to waver from his position that Assad needed to be removed from power. Even when Damascus agreed to sign the CWC and dismantled some chemical weapons, there was no assurance that Assad would remain in power. Coercion requires assurance and promises if it is to be successful,⁷ but Assad was not convinced that regime change would be off the table if he complied with non-use of chemical agents.

In their theoretical approach, Bowen, Knopf, and Moran formulate three propositions rather than formal hypotheses. They reasonably state that the formulation of hypotheses against alternative explanations would ignore the lack of empirical evidence from Syrian decisionmakers. For examples, they can assume that Damascus perceived the value of the use of CW to be high (828) but cannot confirm that assumption with evidence in the form of public statements or interviews. Chemical weapons have indeed been used by regimes as a force multiplier in the past, including by Spain against Berber tribes, 1921-1927,⁸ Italy in Ethiopia, 1935-1936,⁹ and Egypt in Yemen, 1962-1970.¹⁰ All regimes that

⁴ This formula entails that a coercive strategy is only deemed successful if leaders implement threats. It is not valued for the results that are achieved.

⁵ The authors build on Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Alexander L. George and William E. Simons, eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Reid B. C. Pauly, "'Stop or I'll Shoot, Comply and I Won't': The Dilemma of Coercive Assurance in International Politics," (PhD diss., MIT, 2019).

⁶ Criteria of Lebow's checklist for effective deterrence were not fulfilled. See Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1981).

⁷ James Davis, *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2000).

⁸ Ignacio Hidalgo de Cisneros, *Cambio de Rumbo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

⁹ Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War, 1935-1941*, Translated by P. D. Cummins, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

¹⁰ Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

used CW attacks perceived them as ways of accomplishing their goals faster. Especially if regimes face internal threats, they contemplate the use of chemical warfare.¹¹ That the Assad regime used CW to tilt the domestic battle in its favor (819) is a logical assessment that can be made even without access to primary sources.

To test their proposition, the authors start with discussing Obama's 'red line' in detail and correctly highlight the ambiguity when the president used the phrase, with some considering that it might have been an offhand remark.¹² Whether it was offhanded or not at the time, it became a commitment to deterrence when the president and administration spokespeople repeated it and further reiterated the policy. However, the authors do not engage with Obama's attempt to downplay his 'red-line' comment a year later. He asserted, "I didn't set a red line. The world set a red line when governments representing 98 percent of the world's population said the use of CW are abhorrent and passed a treaty forbidding their use even when countries are engaged in war."¹³

When analyzing the compellence case, the authors briefly acknowledged Obama's attempt to seek congressional approval for intervention.¹⁴ He was prepared to use military force - but no president acts alone. Foreign policy decision-making entails several actors at various levels, not merely the individual one.¹⁵ Deterrence and/or compellence successes and failures must be explored in the light of several actors beyond the president.¹⁶ With exception of the section entitled "Restoring Deterrence," the authors focused primarily on Obama's individual decision-making.

Along with the 'red line,' another topic of controversy is the question of how successful the diplomatic agreement with Syria in 2013 was. The authors tackle this issue with laudable objectivity. However, their conclusions rely on one main assumption: that Syria signing the CWC and destroying 1,300 metric tons of CW was a success (798). Syria maintained an undeclared stockpile, the agreement excluded chlorine, and Syria maintained production capabilities. Nevertheless, the authors present a substantive analysis and make a compelling case as to why Obama's compellence was an achievement, albeit a limited one.

The authors include a discussion of the CW norm. The hesitance of the United States and others to use military force against the Assad regime in response to CW attacks directly challenged the notion of the norm against chemical warfare. The authors correctly explain that Western powers did not see the use in Syria as sufficient for military intervention

¹¹ Gregory D. Koblenz, "Regime Security: A New Theory for Understanding the Proliferation of Chemical and Biological Weapons," *Contemporary Security Policy* 34:3 (November 2013): 501-525, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2013.842298>

¹² Peter Baker, Mark Landler, David E. Sanger and Anne Barnard, "Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Put U.S. in Bind on Syria," *The New York Times*, 4 May 2013; Derek Chollet, "Obama's Red Line, Revisited," *Politico Magazine*, 19 July 2016.

¹³ Mark Landler, Jonathan Weisman, and Michael Gordon, "Split Senate Panel Approves Giving Obama Limited Authority on Syria," *The New York Times*, 4 September 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/05/world/middleeast/divided-senate-panel-approves-resolution-on-syria-strike.html>.

¹⁴ S.J.Res.21 — 113th Congress (2013-2014)." 113th Congress, Senate – Foreign Relations, September 6, 2013, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113thcongress/senate-joint-resolution/21>.

¹⁵ For the various actors in foreign policy decision-making, see Margaret G. Hermann, "How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Framework," *International Studies Review* 3:2 (Summer 2001): 47-81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3186565>.

¹⁶ Another one that received underwhelming mentioning were the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. See Karim Makdisi and Coralie Pison Hindawi, "The Syrian Chemical Weapons Disarmament Process in Context: Narratives of Coercion, Consent, and Everything in Between." *Third World Quarterly* 38:8 (May 2017): 1691-1709, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1322462>

(816). However, they do not identify the cause of limitation to punish Syria. It is not merely the scope of chemical warfare (817), but the identity and hierarchy of victims that limits the robustness of the CW norm.¹⁷

To inform their case study research, the authors conducted twenty-five interviews with senior officials from France, Israel, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (802). While their access to these officials is laudable, it is difficult for the reader to follow some of the authors' assumptions and conclusions. For example, the authors state that Russia found the U.S. threat to use military force most credible and were persuaded that Obama would eventually act (829). It is not clear how the authors arrived at that conclusion. That poses the larger question of how scholars can make information more verifiable while also keeping the sources anonymous.

To make their analytical framework of three conditions more convincing, the authors could have provided more specific policy recommendations in the Syrian case. In the first phase, how could U.S. policymakers have made a threat that increased the risk to the regime and assured the decrease of this risk if Assad had complied with demands? In the second phase, how could U.S. compellence have been more successful in the long-term to prevent repeated use of CW? The authors end their analysis in 2014 when the Assad regime again used CW. That is understandable given the length restrictions of articles and is an interesting subject of research going forward.

The authors effectively demonstrate the limits of the 'resolve plus bomb' formula that is based on a demonstration of toughness and cost imposition using airstrikes. While more case studies are needed in which both variants of coercion - deterrence and compellence - operate, as the authors note, this is a rather unusual occurrence. Arguably, the First Gulf Crisis (1990-91) presented a case that included both U.S. coercive strategies.¹⁸ Along those lines, scholars should explore in comparison what assurance looks like for various regimes and whether it is always connected to the survival of such. If it is not the fear of being overthrown, how can policymakers identify the right threat or concern that provides leverage and coerces an actor into compliance? Bowen, Knopf, and Moran's implications could have discussed some external recommendations for policymakers. The findings could be applied to other cases and used for a forward-looking perspective. That could include a discussion of coercive diplomacy in current case studies such as Iran (nuclear developments) and Russia (malware attacks). The Syria case appears to be such a unique one that it is difficult to see the wider implications and policy applications of the authors' research if they are not explicitly addressed.

Dr. Doreen Horschig is a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She studies nuclear policy, specifically public opinion, norms contestation, and counter-proliferation. Her current project discusses the psychological causal mechanism of public support for the use of nuclear weapons. Her work has been published as scholarly articles in *Third World Quarterly* and *Defense and Security Analysis* and political commentaries in outlets such as the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, *War on the Rocks*, *The Conversation*, *Inkstick Media*. She received a Ph.D. in security studies from the University of Central Florida, a M.A. in international relations from New York University, and a B.A. in international studies from Manhattan College.

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¹⁷ Güneş M. Tezcür and Doreen Horschig, "A Conditional Norm: Chemical Warfare from Colonialism to Contemporary Civil Wars," *Third World Quarterly* 42:2 (November 2020): 366-384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1834840>.

¹⁸ Maria Sperandei, "Bridging Deterrence and Compellence: An Alternative Approach to The Study of Coercive Diplomacy," *International Studies Review* 8:2 (2006): 253-280, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2006.00573.x>.