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RESEARCH PAPER

From Negotiation to Escalation: Coercive Diplomacy, Military Force, and the 2026 Iran–US Nuclear Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This research Paper observes how coercive diplomacy influences the process of developing the 2026 Iran-United States nuclear crisis, in particular, by means of military signaling and negotiations. It was a crisis that grew up in the midst of a widespread strategic distrust and zone instability. The Iranian missiles drills and coercive strategies of the U.S. Navy deployments were an exhibit of rival tactics in negotiations. This qualitative experiment utilizes the case-study method in order to assess diplomatic trends, military cues, and patterns of escalation in early 2026. The use of coercive diplomacy first built bargaining power yet increasing levels of mistrust and retaliation undermined diplomatic interaction. The deterrence policy in structurally limited ways, as the response of deviating to confrontation intensified instability in the region. It is highly necessary to strengthen the communication pathways, confidence-reinforcing steps and regional security to ease the intensity and implement possible diplomatic ties on sustainable basis.

KEYWORDS Coercive Diplomacy, Military Posturing, Nuclear Negotiations, Iran–US Relations, Diplomatic Engagement, Sanctions Relief, Strategic Leverage

Introduction

The 2026 Iran-United States nuclear talks took place in a very high-stakes strategic context where diplomacy and military signaling worked co-optively. After years of growing tension over the nuclear intentions of Iran and the failure of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Washington and Tehran tentatively re-entered indirect talks in early 2026. The aim was to reach an amended structure that would limit the enrichment of uranium and nuclear capacity of Iran in exchange of relaxed sanctions. These negotiations took place in neutral places like Geneva and Muscat but they were taking place against a background of mounting military posture throughout the Middle East. The US increased its presence in the region with expanded naval presence, carrier strike group, and placing strategic forces and used coercive signaling to strengthen diplomatic compulsions. Whereas the American officials explained these actions as deterrence protection in order to avoid escalation, Tehran presented the decision to engage in negotiations as a strategic measure to prevent war without losing its sovereignty under long-term external pressure (Waqar & Muzaffar, 2026).

The geopolitics of these negotiations are larger in terms of deeper structural rivalries. The rejuvenation of Russia-Iran strategic alliance has shifted regional balance of power, and complicated strategic calculations by the U.S. making the Tehran view that it is acting in a multipolar world, not under unilateral Western dominance. This shifting convergence increased the bargaining capacity of Iran and diminished the isolation power of the U.S. coercive force (Bukhari, 2023; Khan, et al., 2019).

The nuclear crisis is also entrenched in the long standing Israeli-Iranian conflict. The antagonism between Tehran and Tel Aviv that started during the aftermath of the revolution has positioned the nuclear program of Iran as not only a technological one but also an

ideological and security conflict. In this competition, the nuclear capability plays the role of deterrent pose and a geopolitical signaling mechanism. As a result, the U.S. military deployments in negotiations were viewed in Tehran not as a bargaining gain but as elements of a larger containment policy to match the goals of Israeli military security. (Bukhari, 2024)

The history supplies some insight into the depth of the framework of this hostility. The relations between Iran and Israel shifted to a subterranean collaboration before the Islamic Revolution to open-ended aggression after the revolution, establishing the sense of suspicion and conditioning perceptions of the threat in the long term. Such a change placed nuclear issues in a wider context of geopolitical rivalry that is still familiar in modern crisis relations (Youns & Muzaffar, 2025; Bukhari et al., 2024)

To add to this outlook, more expansive studies of Iran-Israel geopolitics reveal that enmity between the two nations is a structural attribute of the Middle East security system, and it affects the pattern of alliances, proxy wars, and cycles of escalation. The negotiations of 2026 thus played out in historically pre-conditioned antagonies that limited the freedom of manoeuvre in the diplomatic plane and increased the escalation threat. (Bukhari et al., 2024)

The path on which the 2026 talks took can show how unsustainable it is to strike the right balance between pressure and diplomacy. What had been a calculated force pose to secure a better bargaining position, slowly transformed into a face-off. Towards the end of February 2026, talks collapsed amid growing allegations of bad faith and the use of ever more aggressive military operations. Timed U.S. Israeli attacks hit Iranian military and strategic installations, creating a significant change of coercive signaling to active warfare. Iran retaliated with missile and drone attacks on regional military facilities to escalate the war and refashion a coercive diplomatic system into a long-term regional warfare.

One such climax was the strategic killings of the Iran senior leadership. A joint air attack on 28 February 2026 killed the Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to decapacitate the Iranian strategic command. It is said that the operation killed many high-ranking leaders in the military and political arena creating a leadership vacuum and fueling the dynamics of retaliation. This kind of escalation is indicative of previous crises between Iran and Israel and the U.S. in that the tactical signaling may escalate to kinetic conflict once the perception of threat becomes too hard to manage. (Bukhari, 2025)

This situation highlights the main dilemma of coercive diplomacy: the policy aims at balancing plausible threats of violence with a continued policy of diplomacy to affect enemy actions without relapsing into a full war. Its success hinges on a thin balance, such that threats need to be credible enough to make changes, but not too credible as to provoke retaliation. The most recent example of how that balance can break can be seen in the 2026 Iran-US crisis. As the pressure of coercion intensifies to the point where political leadership is targeted lethally, the difference between the bargaining power and war is almost unnoticed. Instead of the expected compliance, coercion can increase resistance, increase the feelings of insecurity, and trigger an escalation of retaliation (Pokorny, 2026).

The political pressure on the country complicated the strategic calculations even further. Washington policymakers were afforded requests to stay credible in non-proliferation and assure regional allies, and Iranian leaders were under pressure to defy foreign pressure. Military posturing therefore played a role of external negotiations as well as domestic political signaling, which left little ground on which to compromise on both issues.

In this paper, the interaction of military threats, deployment of force, targeting of leaders, and the negotiation dynamics is critically studied as the practice and constraints of coercive diplomacy in the 2026 Iran-US nuclear crisis. The paper assesses the feasibility of

coercive diplomacy in supporting credible deterrence in nuclearized conflicts by evaluating the role of coercive actions in contagionizing bargaining and initiating war. The current animosity points to the acuity of a review of the sustainability of coercive approaches in highly distrustful settings with ever-narrowing levels of escalation.

By conducting a systematic examination of the 2026 crisis, the study leads to the general discussion of the role of military might in the negotiation of diplomacy in international politics today. It attempts to clarify how coercion and diplomacy used together can serve as a tool of conflict management in addition to causing unintentional escalation, and this clarifies subsequent attitude to stabilizing nuclear crises and the management of security in the region.

Literature Review

The theory of coercive diplomacy takes centre stage in the current international relations theory especially during high stakes security crises where military threats and diplomatic interactions are used in tandem. The expert contribution made by Thomas Schelling on deterrence and compellence laid the foundation on the concept that the plausible ability to cause harm-where well expressed can discourage unwanted acts or even compel one to change their behaviors without the need to go to war. Based on this, Alexander George developed the concept of coercive diplomacy as a form of attack in which some threats of force are offered with bargaining processes that encourage an opponent to change or shift certain policies. Empirical literature points to the following conditions as being the most effective with coercive diplomacy: the demands should be precise and restricted; the threats made should be believable but proportionate; there should be believable diplomatic off-ramps; and the target state should believe that it is gaining in security or economic status by complying. On the contrary, coercive tactics are bound to fail when threats are perceived as bluff, demands are perceived as humiliating, and the leadership is restricted by the domestic politics (Wassan et al., 2026).

Iranian nuclear crisis has provided a definite empirical challenge to the theory of coercive diplomacy. Since 2006, the United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on Iranian banking, energy and military sectors followed by U.S and European Union sanctions that drastically reduced Iranian oil exports by about 2.5 million barrels per day to close to 1 million barrels per day by 2012. The sanctions caused a sharp reduction in the Iranian GDP, inflation increased significantly to over 30 percent and the rial was devalued significantly during the peak years of sanctions. Such compounding factors led to the action of getting more actively involved in negotiation with the P5+1 to reach the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA is explained by most researchers as a partial success of coercive diplomacy: economic pressure motivated negotiation, but it was possible to reach an agreement only by the balanced combination of sanctions relief and acknowledgment of the limited enrichment rights of Iran. Others also say that the strategic recalculation of Iran was not caused only by coercion but multilateral legitimacy and diplomatic activity (Helwig, 2026).

In 2018, the U.S. pulled out of the JCPOA and launched the so-called maximum pressure campaign, which sparked the renewal of the discussions about the boundaries of the coercive policy. The aggravated sanctions with the inclusion of the secondary sanctions on the third-party states cut Iranian oil exports to less than 500,000 barrels per day by 2020 and drastically lowered foreign direct investment. Nonetheless, rather than caving under pressure, Iran steadily diminished the compliance with the restrictions of JCPOA, enriched above 3.67 percent, and deployed sophisticated centrifuges. This step is often given as a sign that coercion that is not supported by credible diplomatic reciprocity can make resistance stronger especially where the policies clash with matters of sovereignty, national identity and regime legitimacy (Weiss, 2025).

The negotiations of 2026 are the next phase of development of coercive diplomacy, where the active use of military signaling was open to active diplomatic activity. The US has sent several carrier strike forces to the Middle East, reinforced missile defenses in the region, and negotiated indirectly via mediators but communicated both deadlines and conditional threats of escalation at the same time. This temporal pressure introduced into negotiations can be considered a pinnacle of compellent logic: by making the costs of non-compliance within a time frame more apparent, Washington was trying to alter the strategic calculus and the bargaining terms of Iran (Bell, 2026). Iran retaliated by delicate military cues of its own. Navigations along the Strait of Hormuz -where about 20 percent of the world oil trade passes as well as massive military exercises and maneuvers were used as evidence of deterrence strength and counter coercion. These measures strengthened the Tehran stance that it was not going to break under pressure even as it was formally adhered to negotiation. The dialogue and military posturing simultaneously depict the even more and more hybrid character of modern coercive diplomacy, in which deterrence and bargaining are inextricably intertwined (Touiserkani, 2025).

The leverage politics in 2026 are multidimensional. The enrichment levels in Iran were close to the levels that led to nuclear breakout time that was very minimal thus forcing urgency in the strategic evaluation of Washington. At the same time, the high level of the U.S. military presence in the region with tens of thousands of military and heavy naval forces meant that the military threats had strong operational support. Such credibility increases deterrent signaling, whereas literature on crisis bargaining highlights the fact that the reciprocal military mobilization also increases the risk of miscalculation especially in congested maritime and aerial space (Jaafar, 2025). The 2026 crisis reveals significant gaps in analysis despite the current scholarship suggesting a considerable amount of guidance. Conventional forms of coercive diplomacy focus on proportionality, believable promises and effective communication. However, in the case of real-time crisis situations--when leaders produce public ultimatums and yet the negotiation channels are left open, this is a sign of dynamic interaction between military pressure, domestic politics and resolve perceptions. Policymakers in the United States need to demonstrate that they are firm with Congress and regional partners, whereas Iranian leaders cannot possibly seem weak to coercion by foreign powers without losing their credibility at home. Such internal political limitations make crisis bargaining more difficult, and the area to compromise a little smaller (Genovese, 2026).

Altogether, the literature on coercive diplomacy indicates that a carefully-managed pressure may produce incentives to negotiation, which occurred in the run-up to the JCPOA. Nonetheless, unilateral or excessive coercion can lead to counter-escalation and nuclear progress as was witnessed in 2018. The 2026 negotiation therefore serves as a modern day laboratory where these conflicting theoretical assertions are tested. Through examining military deployments, enrichment, and sanction levels and diplomatic interaction to the wider context of the coercive diplomacy theory, researchers can more easily evaluate whether military threats in this scenario contribute to compromise, resistance entrenchment, or both processes coexist within a fragile balance of deterrence and diplomacy (Tarkhani, 2026).

Material and Methods

This paper follows the qualitative case study design with a few quantitative indicators to investigate the effect of military threats on the Iran-U.S. nuclear talks over 2026. It concerns the 2025-26 bargaining, examining the interplay between diplomatic engagement and military signaling. The sources of data are the official statements of the U.S. and Iranian officials and the credible sources of the international media as well as the scholarship on the coercive diplomacy and the history of the previous nuclear negotiations and the 2015 JCPOA. Coercive intensity measures are provided in terms of U.S military deployments, escalating rhetoric, and changes in Iran nuclear posture. An analysis is

conducted using process tracing that connects the military actions and the diplomatic responses and content analysis of official rhetoric that evaluates the patterns of threat and concession. The hypothesis of the study is to test whether military coercive pressure would lead to compromise, resistance, or both.

Results and Discussion

Coercive diplomacy is now at the center of the modern study of security, especially in the face of nuclear crises involving high stakes when both military signaling and diplomatic interaction take place concomitantly. The classical differentiation between deterrence and compellence that was made by Thomas Schelling is fundamental to the recognizing the 2026 Iran-US negotiations. Whereas deterrence aims at preventing an enemy to act, compellence tries to alter the current behaviour by the use of believable threats of force without engaging in full-scale war. This logic was further refined by Alexander George who came up with the concept of coercive diplomacy as a balanced approach that encompassed conditional threats, limited goals, credible communication and diplomatic off-ramps. The effectiveness of these strategies is determined by proportionality, clarity of requirements, and ensuring that the target believes that by doing so, he/she will enhance the survival of the regime instead of jeopardizing it (Wassan et al., 2026).

The negotiations of 2026 serve as the example of the compellent logic that was put into practice by Schelling. The US has deployed numerous carrier strike groups, strengthened missile defense networks, and deployed long-range strike forces in the Middle East. This was a force posture, backed by tens of thousands of manpower, projection capability, which was to add to the believability of threats, without formally falling into the thresholds of signaling as opposed to declared war. According to Schelling, Washington attempted to exploit the element of risk and change the cost benefit calculations made by Iran without necessarily having to attain kinetic escalation (Broka-Kovalevska, 2026).

This coercive stance was heightened by the advances in the Iranian nuclear program. With the breakdown of the 2015 JCPOA, levels of enrichment were said to increase above the 3.67 percent limit, which drastically reduced breakout times that were estimated at about one year prior. The perceived collapse of breakout time increased the level of urgency in the U.S. strategic judgment and the case of visible coercive pressure. In Georgean terms, the rationale for this move was because it aimed to exert plausible pressure and provided a diplomatic resolution within stiffer enrichment parameters and verification (Khan, 2025).

But previous experience contradicts this idea that coercion is all that creates compliance. The 2018-2020 campaign of maximum pressure campaign proved not to be able to force a concession by excessive economic sanctions, which had cut Iranian oil exports to less than 2.5 million barrels per day, down to less than 500,000 barrels per day. Rather, Iran enriched and installed sophisticated centrifuges. This trend concurs with theoretical alarms that forms of coercion that are likely to be seen as existential can end up being more forceful when faced with a domestic discourse of legitimacy and sovereignty (Dieudonne, 2026; Avey, 2026).

Military retaliations of Iran in 2026 are another indication of the mutual nature of the relationships within Schelling. Mass maneuvers and missile tests over the Strait of Hormuz, where about a fifth of the oil trade of the world passes, were countersigns of compulsion. These measures defined the ability of Iran to levy economic penalties in case of escalation hence strengthening its bargaining stance. Tehran, instead of giving up, resorted to calibrated counter-coercion to showcase that compelled is an interactive, bilateral process, as opposed to a unilateral one (Avey, 2026).

Coercive signaling is made worse by the regional dimension. The U.S. deployments served as both pressure to Iran as well as reassurance to states in the Gulf as well as Israel as a reminder of the credibility of the alliances and its deterrent. However, according to the crisis bargaining theory, there are high risks of miscalculations in dense military environments. Accidental escalation is becoming more about reality when those opponents have high preparedness and tight diplomatic-level schedules (Biswas, 2026).

The economic interdependence around the globe is another constraint. Any interference with oil flows via the Strait of Hormuz would have systemic effects on the international markets and will create external pressure to de-escalate. In that regard, the coercive diplomacy in 2026 is carried out in a wider structural environment where economic interdependence limits and shapes strategic decisions (Ullah & Ahmed, 2026).

The domestic political variables also determine the success or failure of coercive diplomacy. Schelling stressed the idea of credibility based not on ability but a political commitment. In the United States, legislative threats, as well as congressional review, limit the negotiators. Hardline groups that do not want to compromise are being empowered by sanctions-related suffering and nationalistic discourses in Iran. Coercive pressure therefore overlaps with politics of domestic legitimacy and may reduce the diplomatic space (Baslamisli, 2026; Spadilieri, 2026).

Threat sequencing and inducement sequencing is still a determining element, which George highlights in his framework. The partial effectiveness of the JCPOA was also due to the fact that, the phased sanctions relief and the multilateral guarantees that it offered real incentives to follow up. Contrarily, the sequencing of sanctions relief, limiting enrichments and verification systems has characterized the 2026 deliberations with contention. In the case of the uncertainty of inducements and the predominance of coercion, compliance incentives become weaker (Spadiliero, n.d.; Jaafar, 2025b).

This stalemate that can be observed in 2026 highlights another critical theoretical conflict: coercive diplomacy can influence bargaining power and redefine the negotiating horizons, but it does not ensure the proportionality of the diplomatic results. Although the presence of the U.S. military forces changed the strategic calculations, the fundamental differences on enrichment levels and regional security structure are yet to be solved. The use of coercion in the given case seems to be rather a structural limitation of the negotiation terms than a direct engine of concession (Reisinezhad, 2026).

Finally, the 2026 Iran-US crisis is a vindication of the fact that Schelling established that compelment is a risky approach since it takes time to force the opponent to visibly submit-thus exposing him to escalation. The crisis also confirms the warning by George that coercive diplomacy only works when there are threats which are restricted, believable, and with presumed diplomatic escapes. As the threats rise towards the leadership targeting and the regional militarization, the boundary between compellence and war becomes extremely thin. The bargaining dynamics in 2026 have been changed by the military threats, yet the ultimate result of compromise, severe resistance, or the repetition cycle would be dependent on the proportionality, sequence, and internal political limitations (Ali et al., 2025).

The 2026 Iran-U.S. nuclear crisis illustrates that coercive diplomacy successfully helped greatly to transform the strategic environment and finally hit the mark of the limit of the compellence theory into the prolonged military conflict, thus, putting the compellence theory to the test. During the early stages, the U.S. increased military deployments comprising of several carrier strike groups, enhanced missile defense systems, and in-place long-range strike capability were meant to enhance bargaining power in indirect negotiations brokered through Oman and held in Geneva. In line with the logic of compellence proposed by Schelling, Washington attempted to control the risk, increase the

cost of non-adherence, and shorten the negotiation timelines without eliminating the option of a diplomatic resolution. Community time restrictions, threats of severe repercussions, increased urgency and reduced an agreed-upon time frame.

Nonetheless, the growth curve showed the instability of proportionality, which is a fundamental requirement highlighted by Alexander George. Coercive diplomacy had been turned into kinetic warfare by the shift of calibrated signaling to coordinated U.S.-Israeli airstrike of Iranian strategic targets, such as a targeted kill of senior leadership figures. Military escalation did not force Iran to make a decisive concession but instead increased the resistance and made the war a geographical one. The results show that as soon as the coercive threats were transformed into direct force, the line between compellence and war was broken as such.

Tactical but not strategic capitulation was shown by Iran during negotiation phase when they were under pressure. Tehran indicated conditional willingness to partial technical terms of access to large stockpiles of highly enriched uranium - including partial management of large uranium stockpiles - but strongly opposed complete enrichment freezes or structures that were seen as violating sovereign rights. This substantiates the dual-effect hypothesis put forward above: the coercive pressure augmented the diplomatic activity, yet at the same time strengthened the red lines associated with the existence of the regime and the sense of national identity. Plausible U.S. military preparedness motivated the further involvement in negotiation, but not at a cost of essential strategic demands.

After the eruption of the hostilities, the counter-coercive posture of Iran escalated. In hours after the initial attacks on 28 February 2026, Iran fired ballistic projectiles and drones on American military bases in the Persian Gulf, such as in Bahrain (where the U.S. has its home). Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia (Fifth Fleet). There were other reported strikes that were directed at U.S. affiliated sites in Iraq and Jordan. These retaliative measures went beyond rhetoric to show that Iran had the ability to institute real military and economical expenses in several regional arenas. At the same time, Iran threatened to close Strait of Hormuz- one of the chokepoints where the world oil traded by about a fifth of the world economy passes- therefore bringing significant systemic economic risk to the conflict. This mutual increase proves the literature of crisis bargaining that compellence is interactive in nature, and that at times where both parties have believable escalation capacities, the effects of coercive leverage will be symmetrical instead of hierarchical.

The U.S. deployments in the region partly succeeded in their reassurance efforts, especially to Israel and the Gulf states to strengthen the deterrence credibility. However, the high concentration of military activity in the Gulf, which is manifested in high-readiness forces working in overloaded airspace and maritime routes, increased the exposure to miscalculations. Schelling also cautioned that compellence had to be maintained visibly until it becomes evident and this would boost the probability of escalations. This can be demonstrated by the 2026 crisis: there were tight deadlines, demands of the citizens and counter-mobilization, which increased the risk of an accidental conflict.

The crisis caused global energy markets to be volatile economically. Even minor destabilization of shipping routes in the Strait of Hormuz generated pressure upwards in the price of oil and overall pressure to de-escalate. The related global interdependence of the economies acted as a structural constraint to unrestricted escalation but it did not prevent the prelude hostilities. This implies that the systemic economic incentives are not enough to replace the credible diplomatic off-ramps.

The domestic politics also preconditioned results. Ultimatum by the state and the promise of alliances by the state enhanced the credibility of threats but reduced the diplomatic flexibility. Nationalist discourses and the legitimacy of regimes in Iran were

unified to generate internal integrity after foreign attacks. These coup removals failed to disintegrate state power, but rather strengthened the resistance framing and made the strategic determination harder. This finding highlights one of the fundamental weaknesses of coercive diplomacy, namely when pressure is seen as existential, it can be reinforcing instead of deteriorating internal unity within the target state.

On the whole, the results show that military pressure in 2026 changed the bargaining parameters, urgency, and risk calculations recalibration but yielded no structural compromise of core nuclear issues. Rather, coercive diplomacy became a lasting confrontation upon the worsening of the proportionality and sequencing terms. Three main conclusions are supported in the case:

- Compellence may speed up the nature of negotiation but does not ensure compliance.
- In cases where the regime is at risk of disappearance or loss of sovereignty due to coercion, the response becomes more intense instead of being weak.
- The nuclearized conflict escalation boundaries are lower than the classical models propose, especially when the time schedule is compressed and both armies are mobilized against each other.

The experience of the 2026 crisis shows that coercive diplomacy is mostly a structural tool, which combines leverage, shortens timelines, and raises stakes, but cannot work alone to overcome longstanding geopolitical disputes. When the threats became a leadership decapitation and multi-theater military exchange, diplomacy was during that point on the background of the battlefields. Military pressure was effective in the strategic environment, but it is not adequate as a single tool in addressing the Iran-U.S. nuclear stalemate.

Theoretically, the case confirms the warning by Schelling that compellence is riskier by nature than deterrence in that it requires some visible obedience under repeated pressure, thus increasing the risk of escalation. It also supports the position put forward by George that coercive diplomacy works when the threats are restricted, believable, and diplomatic exits are present. Unless these steps are followed carefully with sequencing, proportional restraint and plausible inducements, coercive leverage can produce the conflict it is meant to avoid.

Conclusion

A prime example of coercive diplomacy in the nuclearized region is the 2026 Iran-U.S. nuclear crisis, which offers some of the most significant impacts on the contemporary environment to date. What started as delicate military signalling combined with oblique negotiation line of action turned into direct face off, illustrating the strength and the weakness of compellence strategies. The United States attempted to control risk with observable force deployments, carrier strike groups, missile defenses, and public ultimatums, as was in line with the reasoning of Schelling, who was aiming to raise the costs of non-compliance with war, but without necessarily going to war. These solutions tightened deadlines and increased urgency, affecting the work of diplomats. Nonetheless, the shift towards kinetic to signaling strikes, such as the killing of top Iranian leadership figures, signified a failure of the proportionality principle that stood at the heart of the enactment of coercive diplomacy by Alexander George. Instead of forcing a decisive compromise, escalation resulted in retaliation between U.S. bases in Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, UAE and Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Jordan, expanding the regional area of crisis. The missile and drone retaliations of Iran, along with threats to the Strait of Hormuz, made compellence become interactive escalation (Muzaffar, et. al., 2017). The case therefore affirms that when the coercive threats have been made real (in perception) then they strengthen opposition other than produce compliance. The results indicate that military

coercion can change the bargaining power, heighten the sense of urgency and transform strategy, yet it alone cannot solve old geopolitical scores that are founded in sovereignty and legitimacy of the regime and geopolitical competition. In 2026, coercive diplomacy was a device of structure, not a tool of decisional device. Diplomacy took a back seat to military dynamics once violence was the order of the day and leadership targeting had become a reality.

Hypothetically, the crisis confirms the warning made by Schelling that compellence is in itself more dangerous than deterrence since it necessitates the consistent pressure until the results of visible compliance will be realized. It also supports the idea of George, that coercive diplomacy can only be effective when the threats are restrained, believable, and there are workable diplomatic exits. The loss of a sense of proportion, shrinking schedules and runaway-train escalation created minimal room to resolve a dispute amicably in 2026. The military threats changed the atmosphere of negotiations but were not enough to solve the nuclear dispute behind it. What the current state of affairs highlights is a very important point to note: coercive diplomacy in nuclearized conflicts runs on a very thin edge between bargaining and war. In absence of well-sequenced inducings, plausible off-ramps and regulated signaling, coercion will threaten to hasten the acceleration it is attempting to avoid.

Recommendations

- **Focus on Short-term De-escalatory Communication Systems.** Since there is active military dialogue in the gulf theaters, it is necessary to set up safe and direct channels of crisis communication between the U.S. and Iranian military leadership. There are high-density force environments, especially in the Strait of Hormuz and air corridors within the region, which pose a significant risk of miscalculation. Special deconflictation systems can avert unintentional escalation in an elevated readiness.
- **Return Proportionality in Coercive Signaling.** Proportional restraint should be brought back in coercive postures in future diplomatic work. The controlled balance needed in compellence is undermined by public ultimatums and strategies that are aimed at the leader. Recalibrating a force posture of offensive signaling to a defensive deterrence would lessen the perceptions of threat of existentialism without impairing the bargaining leverage.
- **Rediscover Believable Diplomatic Off-Ramps.** In line with the construct of George, the coercive pressure should be accompanied by well-defined de-escalation routes. To reintroduce sanctions to a state of reciprocity and alignment of incentives, structured, staged sanction relief to be conditioned on verifiable nuclear thresholds, monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), should be reintroduced.
- **Distinct Military Escalation and Nuclear Technical Dialogue.** To the maximum possible extent, negotiations must be decoupled with the developments in the battlefield. The creation of parallel tracks, de-escalation and technical nuclear, would diminish the opportunity of derailing the diplomatic process through military incidents.
- **Enlist Regional Stakeholders as Stabilizing Actors.** Crisis management institutions should be institutionalised to include Gulf states, Oman and other mediators. Regional actors are personally exposed to escalation threats and may act as stabilizing brokers, especially in maritime security provisions in Strait of Hormuz.
- **Institutionalize Maritime and Airspace Confidence-Building Measures.** In light of the concentration of naval and aerial resources, treaties on notification procedures, exclusion zones, and incident prevention would go a long way in curbing the possibility of accidents escalating accidentally. According to crisis bargaining theory, organized transparency can reduce misinterpretation at times of high tension.

- **Adopt Economic Stabilization Mechanisms.** Since the volatility of the crisis is increased by the global energy markets, the multilateral economic stabilization commitments may also act as indirect motivations to de-escalation. Limited waivers on sanctions and coordinated guarantees on security of oil transit on de-escalatory criteria may strengthen moderation.
- **To match the Diplomatic Flexibility with Domestic Political Messaging.** Washington and Tehran should refrain from absolutist rhetoric in public that has closed the negotiating space. Domestic legitimacy can be maintained by using strategic ambiguity and controlled messaging, which allows diplomatic maneuverability to take place.
- **Final Strategic Insight.** The 2026 crisis shows that coercive diplomacy can still be quite effective yet is also very volatile in terms of nuclear conflicts. Military leverage can renegotiate the terms of a negotiation, however, lacking proportionality, sequencing, and plausible exits, it may be systemically escalated. The way forward will involve recalibrating deterrence and diplomacy rebuilding the fine line between coercion and negotiation instead of supplanting it.

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