# COERCION IN THE CONTEMPORARY INTER-STATE SYSTEM

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The reform and the preservation of the current international order depends upon the ability of the global leaders to phase coercion out of inter-state relations. The fact cannot be denied that our world, despite the extraordinary advances in the realm of science and technology and concomitant improvement in global living standards in the last half century, is still stuck with atavistic modes of interaction at the level of relations amongst nations. In some cases and in some regions, it can be observed that the greater the rate of national progress, the faster the regression to pre-modern modes of inter-state behavior.

The strong still ride roughshod over the rights of the weak and the feeble can but protest ineffectually without any concrete hope of redress or quick amelioration of their plight. Even in cases where restitution becomes possible, no ex-post-facto remedy can make up for the original wrong that was perpetrated. When we look at how rife oppression is in today’s world, we should be reminded of what the powerful Athenians said to the hapless Melians, inhabitants of the small ancient island-state of Melos, when the Athenians demanded that Melos joined Athens against Sparta, and not stay neutral, during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC). As recorded by Thucydides (460–395 BC) in his account of this war, the Athenians said to the Melians,

“You know as well as we do that when we are talking on the human plane questions of justice only arise when there is equal power to compel; in terms of practicality the dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must.”

This Athenian admonition encapsulates the essence of coercion defined as an attempt, action or practice of compelling someone to do something using force or threats. In the second decade of the 21st century, it can surely be granted that man’s notion of justice has indeed come a long way since antiquity and is no longer a question limited to two equal parties but one that involves safeguarding the rights of the weak against depredations of the strong. However, we must also admit that the practical terms of statecraft still are largely the same as they were in the days of the ancients. The proverbially anarchic nature of the international society compels states to employ such coercive means in dealing with other states which they may hesitate to put into effect within their own national jurisdictions. This is not to say that there are no states today which experience such hesitance.

If realism teaches us that states, whether weak or strong, are in a perpetual struggle to maximize their power relative to the power of other states, and if coercion is also a constant fact of inter-state behavior, then it is but natural to think that power maximization and coercion are intimately related. The truth of this assertion can be easily seen in the contemporary world, wherein most states are inexorably caught up in the endless maelstrom of acquiring various means of national power so that they can avoid coercion by other states. It must be mentioned that while it is an inherent right of every state to acquire power, a few states do become addicted to the offensive potential of power rather than its defensive use. Such states become the key global cause of the proliferation of coercion.

Most of the throes of the contemporary world owe their existence to the self-imposed and self-serving compulsion of some states to seek zero-sum self-aggrandizement, to the utter disregard of the greater goals of global peace, prosperity, and harmony. To be fair, however, to such states, they think the utilization of their offensive power and global peace are synonymous. Nothing could be further from truth than this self-congratulatory delusion of such states. If human beings were to act like such states routinely behave in the international realm, they would be marked down as cases for the psychiatrist. But seldom do we pause to reflect upon the pathology of power-crazy state behavior.

We can also see with relative ease that there is a simple positive correlation between the absence of peace in some spot of the world and the tendency of some states to coerce other states in that spot in the pursuit of narrow and negative agendas of power. This correlation can be evidenced in key regions of contemporary Eurasia more readily than other regions of the world. Myopic visions of power lead such states to promote unsustainable policies that do violence to both natural and man-made worlds because these policies are predicated upon a corrosive dehumanization and demonization of rival countries.

It is interesting to see that states that deploy coercion in inter-state relations often tend to have violent histories of internal violence and oppression in which whole ethnicities, communal groups, and social segments have been subjugated forcibly in the interest of the dominant ethnic, communal or social group. The foreign policies of such states merely externalize their internal abnormality. What is worrisome is that such states may become more rather than less coercive if their power status undergoes a downward revision.

If we look at the current international system, we can divide countries into three broad groups or categories based on their attitude toward coercion. The first group consists of countries that enforce coercion as a preferred policy tool. The second group comprises countries that suffer coercion without adequate means at their disposal to counter it. The third group is composed of states that neither practice coercion nor suffer it. It is understandable that people will assign countries to each group, depending upon their subjective preferences and personal biases. This is something unavoidable but still objectivity demands that we study the actual conduct of each state in its dealings with other states before we put it in any of these three groups. We should also remember that the membership of these categories will at best be fluid at any single time. States will keep falling in or out of one group or the other as their power status and international policies change and as perceptions of others change. However, there will be certain states that, by virtue of their peculiar trajectories of historical evolution, will tend to be more durable members of one group rather than the others with slender likelihood of movement across groups.

By virtue of its foundational principles of justice, equality, and freedom combined with its unique historical experience, geographical location, and the policy choices of the current generation of leadership, Pakistan has lived on as the firm denizen of the third group of countries that neither practice nor suffer coercion. This does not mean at all that there were never any moment in its history when it did not face coercion. It did face coercion without succumbing to it. Coercion only succeeds if one succumbs to it. Pakistan’s long-standing resolve to keep itself coercion-free in this double sense is remarkable, considering the fact that South Asia is one of those key regions of Eurasia wherein coercive efforts of different kinds of states are rife and routinely create intra-regional and inter-regional challenges. Here, it is important to note that Pakistan’s anti-coercion and non-coercive efforts are reinforced by likeminded friends that are both near and far.

Pakistan’s efforts to maintain a coercion-free South Asia can be divided into the broad domains of diplomacy and politics, regional economic cooperation, and security and defense. Coercive strategies employed by powers bent on shaping the world and the region according to sub-optimal visions of exclusive rather than inclusive development can only be dealt with, if the anti-coercive strategies of countries rejecting coercion, as a tool of statecraft, are comprehensive, coordinated, and multidimensional in scope. Lessons can be learnt in this regard from anti-coercion efforts of states like the United States. Since 1900, the finest moments of the global leadership of the United States were essentially non-coercive and even anti-coercive. Any country aspiring to leadership on the global stage could learn from the role that the United States played during the Cold War for the preservation of world peace.

In terms of diplomacy and politics, Pakistan has always prioritized equality and horizontality in its interaction with all countries without exception. Pakistan’s relations with other countries are based on a common conception of combined welfare, joint development, and shared growth. Pakistan has consistently and firmly opposed all forms of inequitable and asymmetrical treatment in the international realm. Its role in the region has been motivated by the principles of openness and repudiation of the atavistic principle of “might is right,” which some have tried unsuccessfully to impose on the region. Hegemonism in any form cannot solve global and regional problems. Only an earnest non-coercive approach to current global and regional crises, conflicts, and challenges can surmount the odds. It is a foregone conclusion that coercion creates more problems than it solves. The modern global historical experience, spanning the two centuries from 1800 to 2000, is a telling and tragic reminder of the futility and cyclical nature of coercive approaches to relations amongst nations.

Durable peace will remain elusive so long as states will continue to be exploited openly and covertly by other states for their vulnerabilities. Pakistan’s approach to the conflicts and crises of Kashmir and Afghanistan, inspired by the Pakistanis’ profound affection and care for their Kashmiri and Afghan brethren, is based on the time-honored principles of justice and freedom. Believing that the solutions to both crises are political, Pakistan advocates and supports an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led process of peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction in Afghanistan on the one hand, and a political process beginning with the fulfilment of the UN-monitored right of self-determination for Kashmiris. It needs to be understood that the demands for reconstruction of a war-torn country can be misused by others for their own nefarious ends through insidious provision of development funds that subvert the choices of a poor conflict-ridden country. The region cannot experience inclusive development if some powers continue to cleave to the obsolete policy of seeking conflict at all costs. Such a policy has no place in the enlightened comity of nations.

In terms of regional cooperation, Pakistan’s role and status as the staunch champion of shared development and common prosperity is beyond doubt and dispute. Pakistan’s desire to see everyone prosper together at the same time has propelled it to promote and participate in different regional platforms like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and others. An unhealthy predilection for coercion on the part of the biggest South Asian country is the reason for stunted potential of SAARC. This predilection explains the routine frustration of Pakistan’s desire for regional integration and the promotion of uninterrupted people-to-people contacts in the region.

Pakistan’s decision to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by initiating the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been actuated by BRI’s inherent promise of the realization of integrated Afro-Eurasian development. While most observers around the world, including some in the region as well, have not managed to look at both the BRI and the CPEC in any but geopolitical terms, the long-term purpose of both is the upgradation of the pace and the level of development of peoples, societies, and states by means of creating physical, social, and technological infrastructures for domestic, intra-regional, and inter-regional progress and connectivity. It would not be off the mark to state that coercion in international politics can only be removed with the elimination of national and regional development bottlenecks impeding the collective attainment of prosperity. In this regard, Pakistan is fully committed to the transformation of South Asia into a fully functional, not just a formal, region that is free of hegemonic drives of all sorts. Pakistan has welcomed and encouraged other countries to consider becoming a part of CPEC so that a harmonious regional future can be built together.

Pakistan has paid special attention to the importance of security and defense for maintaining a coercion-free region. Efforts in this domain have led to the establishment of a national security architecture that also directly contributes to the maintenance of regional security. Pakistan’s historical and contemporary role in the preservation of regional peace and stability has been fairly consistent. The successful national struggle, made stronger by the support and solidarity of Pakistan’s friends, against forces of domestic and regional disorder, fragmentation, and terrorism, has effectively checked the excesses of the myrmidons of chaos. More recently, its fight against these forces has been guided by an awareness that unconventional warfare, terrorism, cultural demonization, societal destabilization, and spiritual fragmentation, collectively captured by the term, “hybrid warfare,” are, in the ultimate analysis, strategies of coercion. They can be classed as coercion by other means, when overt strategies have failed or proven too costly to pursue. Pakistan’s response to this form of warfare has, therefore, been coordinated that has taken into account its security, political, economic, social, and cultural ramifications for national cohesion and regional stability. The resources to be utilized for this form of coercion have been both kinetic and non-kinetic, material and ideological, tangible and intangible and last but not the least, public and private. Weaving these diverse resources together for equally varied application, while keeping in view the particular stage of national development, regional growth, and global evolution, together with the grasp of major contradictions involved at each stage and each level, is the challenge before the current national leadership of the country. Success and failure in countering coercion and meeting development-related challenges in the future will depend upon the national ability, or lack thereof, for this kind of panoramic policymaking and policy implementation. In order for the world and the region to steer clear of interstate and domestic conflict and coercion, non-zero-sum conceptions of power, non-coercive forms of inter-state competition, domestic reconciliation, and active promotion of collective and cooperative regional security mechanisms, will need to be adopted by nations at large, together with ensuring the fullest development of individual liberty for all, active societal responsibility, and state responsiveness and measures against inequality.

In sum, one needs to understand the contemporary world in terms of tragic optimism. In so doing one has to constantly remember the six principles of realism formulated by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau in his magnum opus, Politics among Nations. These six principles form the basis of not only inter-state behavior but at a more basic level, group behavior as well as the behavior of individuals within groups. The fifth among these principles states that the moral vision or aspirations of a particular nation, community, or social group may not be universally shared. This particularism leads to a communitarian outlook which creates the justification for one nation, community, or social group to view itself as different from, and so better than, other nations, communities, and social groups. This particularism prepares the ground and provides the justificatory logic for the use of coercion as a necessary tool for safeguarding the integrity of one’s own national community and violating, if need be, the integrity of others. As long as this particularism remains the foundational assumption of national existence in the contemporary inter-state system, coercion will continue to exist as a regular feature of this system.