

## Deterrence and Compellence: Schelling's Concepts and the Dynamics of Bargaining Power

**Thomas Schelling introduced the term “compellence” to complement the concept of “deterrence.” A discussion of the distinctions between these two concepts can shed light on how the capacity to inflict pain or punishment contributes to bargaining power within strategic interactions. This topic also relates closely to debates surrounding counter-value versus counter-force strategies, as well as the concept of tolerable loss.**

Imagine two kids playing with toys. A little girl is trying persuade her friend to give her the toy he's holding. She walks up to him, raises a bucket of sand, and starts pouring it slowly near his feet, making him hand over the toy to stop the sand from getting on him. Here, the girl is using a threatening action to make her friend to give her a toy.

The typical difference between a threat meant to compel an adversary to act and a threat meant to deter them from taking action lies in their objectives. A compelling threat aims to force the adversary to take a specific action or comply with a demand, while a deterring threat seeks to prevent the adversary from initiating an unwanted action in the first place. To compel someone to retreat through the use of a threat, it's essential that I demonstrate a clear willingness and readiness to follow through with action. A mere verbal warning or empty threat (“words are cheap,” says Schelling<sup>1</sup>) would not be enough to achieve this; the enemy needs to believe that I am genuinely prepared to engage if they do not withdraw. This commitment to act reinforces the credibility of the threat and increases the pressure on the enemy to comply. A threat aimed at compelling, rather than deterring, often demands that the punishment be continuously applied until the adversary takes the desired action, rather than as a consequence if they act. This also implies that the initiator must be able to sustain the pressure and endure the situation for as long as it takes for the other side to yield.

Here comes the bargaining power. Derived from one's ability to inflict physical harm on another is evident in concepts such as deterrence, retaliation, reprisal, terrorism, psychological warfare, nuclear blackmail, armistice, and surrender.<sup>2</sup> Military force can at times be used to achieve an objective directly, without the need for persuasion or intimidation. More often, however, military power is used to influence other nations, their governments, or their populations through the threat of harm.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, compellence may take unprecedented forms, and the line separating instigating an action from forcing an opponent to perform disappears. Schelling goes to great lengths to explain this using the example of North Vietnam, where physical damage was inflicted rather than relying solely on verbal threats. Three factors that contributed to it: unilateral bombing, with North Vietnam unable to retaliate in kind; the incorporation of terroristic tactics by the Vietcong; and the absence of nuclear weapons in the conflict.

Drawing on Schelling's illustrious examples, I would like to offer one of my own. Remember the White Rabbit leading Alice into Wonderland by catching her attention and sparking her curiosity? Alice spots the Rabbit and, fascinated, follows him, eventually tumbling down a rabbit hole. Now imagine this: the Rabbit is not the enticing White Rabbit, and he doesn't lure Alice to follow. Instead, they are both

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), The Idiom of Reprisal, page 150

<sup>2</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), Preface, page xiii

<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), Preface, page xiv

standing at the edge of a rabbit hole when the Rabbit abruptly yanks her hand, giving her no choice, and they both fall down the hole.

"Compellence is more like offense."<sup>4</sup> A forcible offence involves seizing something, occupying a location, or disarming an opponent or territory through direct actions that they cannot prevent. In contrast, compellence focuses on forcing the opponent to withdraw.

So, when does compellence become terrorism? Although Schelling explicitly says that the book is not about terrorism, his broader framework of compellence includes strategies like bombing, targeted strikes, or demonstrations of force to pressure an opponent (very often governments and regimes) into compliance.

The effectiveness of compellence, as outlined by Schelling, relies on an adversary's capacity to withstand sustained pressure. The Gaither and Killian Reports created an impetus for theorists to discuss how much the U.S. was willing to endure or lose.<sup>5</sup> This brings in the Concept of Tolerable Loss, which measures how much damage one can endure while remaining functional. Drawing on the example of Brigadier General Robert C. Richardson III, it highlights the difference between losing half of one's resources entirely and sustaining partial damage across all resources. In the former, the undamaged half can still function as planned, maintaining some effectiveness. In the latter, widespread disruption causes operational breakdowns, rendering the remaining forces ineffective despite their physical ability to continue. The idea emphasizes the importance of cohesion and functionality amid losses.<sup>6</sup>

It is the extent to which a nation or military force can absorb damage and still maintain its essential functions. In nuclear strategy, this involves calculating not just the immediate impact of an attack but the longer-term ability to sustain military operations and maintain political stability despite the losses. The goal is to force policy makers and strategists to distinguish between scenarios where some forces or assets are completely lost versus those where partial damage disrupts the functionality of the entire system.

Perhaps, the ultimate fetish of any (at least modern) propagandist is the Concept of Counter-Value. As Schelling eloquently puts it, it is an exaggeration to refer to 19th-century European wars as "the sport of kings", but not a gross exaggeration.<sup>7</sup> Inflicting harm on civilians was not a decisive tool in warfare. Causing injury or destroying property merely diminished the value of what was being contested, to the detriment of both sides. This changed during the Napoleonic Wars. In Napoleon's France, the outcome of war became significant to the people. The nation was mobilised, and the war transformed into a national effort rather than an exclusive pursuit of the elite. The Concept of Counter-Value involves targeting an adversary's civilian population, economic assets, or infrastructure. The aim is to inflict maximum damage on valuable non-military targets, such as cities, industrial centers, and critical civilian resources.

The Concept of Counter-Value is linked to the idea of a second strike by Freedman and Michaels. A second strike is a nation's ability to retaliate effectively even after being hit by an enemy's initial attack

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), Defense and Deterrence, Offense and Compellence, page 79

<sup>5</sup> Lecture 5

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Freedman and Jeffrey Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 9. Limited Means, page 154

<sup>7</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), The Diplomacy of Violence, page 28

(the first strike). While a first strike typically focuses on counter-force—targeting the enemy’s military capabilities, such as missile silos, command centres, and bases to cripple their ability to retaliate—a second strike does not necessarily need to target military assets. Instead, it can focus on targeting the opponent's civilian populations, cities, and critical infrastructure. The rationale is that even if a nation’s military capabilities have been heavily damaged by a first strike, the remaining nuclear arsenal can still be used to inflict massive civilian and economic damage on the adversary. This ability to conduct a devastating counter-value second strike serves as a deterrent against any initial attack, as the cost of such retaliation would be enormous.<sup>8</sup>

The Counter-Value strategy contrasts with the Counter-Force approach, which focuses on neutralising the opponent’s military capabilities. Counter-Force targets are chosen to diminish the adversary’s capacity to wage war, whereas Counter-value targets are aimed at causing psychological, economic, and social harm, essentially using the civilian population and key economic assets as leverage to achieve strategic objectives.

Instead of a conclusion, I will allow myself a frivolous gesture and finish with the lyrics of "The Gambler" by Kenny Rogers, which vaguely resembles strategical planning of that era:

You've got to know when to hold 'em  
Know when to fold 'em  
Know when to walk away  
And know when to run.

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Freedman and Jeffrey Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, page 186