

## **The Logic of Coercion in Cyberspace**

**Erica D. Borghard and Shawn W. Lonergan<sup>1</sup>**

Cyberspace has definitively emerged as the latest frontier of militarized interactions between nation-states. Governments, as they are wont to do in an anarchic international system, have already invested considerable resources to develop offensive and defensive military capabilities in cyberspace. It remains to be seen, however, how and to what extent these tools can be employed to achieve desired political objectives. Put simply, what is the logic of coercion in cyberspace? Can governments utilize cyber power to deter state adversaries from taking undesirable actions or compel them to bend to their wills and, if so, how and under what conditions? This paper draws on the large corpus of coercion theory to assess the extent to which existing frameworks can shed light on the dynamics of coercion in cyberspace. The paper proceeds as follows. First, we outline the theoretical logic of coercion theory and identify the factors necessary for successful coercion. Each element of coercion is immediately followed by a discussion of how it applies to the cyber domain and an assessment of how the particularities of the domain reflect on the requirements of successful coercion. We demonstrate that, based on current capabilities, cyber power has limited effectiveness as an independent tool of coercion. Second, we explore the extent to which cyber power could be used as part of a warfighting strategy to target an adversary's ability or willingness to resist and suggest which strategies are likely to be more versus less effective. We assert that, based on current capabilities, attrition, denial, and decapitation strategies are most likely to be effective in cyberspace. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for policymaking and further research.

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to thank the Carnegie Corporation of New York for the grant that made this research possible, the numerous individuals within the United States Government who agreed to share their candid thoughts on coercion in cyberspace, and insightful comments provided by Robert Jervis, Jack Snyder, and Brian Blankenship. The views expressed in this paper are personal and do not reflect the policy or position of the United States Military Academy at West Point, Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or United States Government.