

**Coercive Negotiation: Theoretical Model and Application  
in the Case of Donald Trump's Strategy towards China**

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## Introduction

Negotiation has evolved into a key tool for exercising foreign policy in the context of an increasingly complex and interdependent international system. Contemporary challenges – political, social, economic – form networks of interactions that disrupt the global balance, highlighting the limits of traditional diplomatic practices and necessitating the development of new strategic approaches. In this environment, where the exercise of power is combined with the negotiating need for crisis management, the concept of coercive negotiation (hereinafter CN) emerges.

CN is an emerging framework that bridges the theory of coercive diplomacy with the dynamics of contemporary negotiation processes. Its uniqueness lies in the combination of rhetorical pressure, threats and cost imposition with the structure of negotiation. Donald Trump's strategy offers a representative example of the practical application of this logic, particularly in the management of US-China relations.

The central research question of this essay is formulated as follows: **To what extent can the theoretical model of coercive negotiation be applied to the analysis of Donald Trump's strategy towards China during his terms in office?** The working hypothesis argues that Trump's strategy is consistent with the principles of CN, using threat, cost and uncertainty as pressure mechanisms in the context of negotiation. However, its application shows fluctuations and inconsistencies, with the result that its exercise does not lead to substantial changes in Chinese behavior. CN ends up functioning not only as a foreign policy tool, but as a broader model of power projection, marking the transition of American diplomacy from persuasion to coercion.

The following analysis includes the conceptual clarification and theoretical foundation of CN, an examination of its relationship with classical theoretical models, and an evaluation of its application in Trump's strategy towards China during his first (2017 – 2021) and second (2025 – present) terms. The aim is to highlight the usefulness of the CN model in understanding Trump's strategy and assessing its effectiveness in the contemporary international negotiating environment.

## **Theoretical Model: Coercive Negotiation (CN)**

### **- Concept and Negotiation Logic**

Negotiation is a key mechanism for promoting interests and preventing conflicts in international relations. According to Zartman and Rubin (2000), it is a process of joint decision-making under conditions of conflict, where the parties reach a common outcome through the exchange of information and mutual offers. Depending on what is at stake, it can take the form of either a zero-sum confrontational game or a cooperative process of mutual benefit.

CN differs from conventional forms of negotiation because it incorporates means of coercion – threats, warnings, ultimatums, gradual enforcement, threatening rhetoric, economic sanctions, and even limited military action – with the aim of changing the opponent's behavior without escalating to war. Its main purpose is to increase the cost of refusal for the opponent, while maintaining dialogue as a tool for crisis control. In addition, CN can incorporate positive incentives or controlled concessions, reinforcing the persuasiveness of the overall pressure.

### **- Theoretical foundation of CN: The contribution of Schelling and George**

Thomas Schelling (1966) argued that negotiations are not a zero-sum game, but a variable-sum game, where the parties have a common interest: to avoid the mutual damage that failure to reach an agreement entails (Dixit, 2006). Within this framework, an actor's power derives not from the direct use of force, but from the persuasive possibility of using it. For Schelling, the logic of *controlled risk – a threat that leaves something to chance* – allows the actor to make his threat uncertain but credible. The concepts of *commitment* – i.e. the voluntary restriction of an actor's options to make it clear that they have no room for retreat – and *credibility* – i.e. the ability of a player to make their threats, commitments or promises credible to their opponent – form the

foundations of pressure strategy. At the same time, the practice of *brinkmanship* reflects the exploitation of shared risk and uncertainty as mechanisms of coercion. In this context, CN is a negotiating application of the logic of controlled risk, where the goal is to get the opponent to comply by shaping their expectations.

Alexander George (1991) introduces the concept of *coercive diplomacy* (CD), defining it as a strategy that seeks to stop or reverse an undesirable action through threats or limited use of force. CD operates at the level of state strategy, while CN is a micro-application of the same coercive logic in the field of negotiation. The two concepts share common theoretical origins, differing in terms of scope and mode of application: CD concerns the behavior of states in a crisis environment, while CN is applied in a negotiating context to shape terms favorable to the coercive actor. In this way, CN can be seen as a functional extension of CD, providing a theoretical model that captures the evolutionary sequence between strategic pressure and negotiated imposition.

### **Donald Trump's negotiating approach**

Trump's negotiating approach is based on the systematic use of power and threats. Maximizing his negotiating advantage and the superiority of his own alternatives is what he seeks, which is why he seeks to limit his opponent's range of options and create power asymmetry. Eugene Kogan (2019) distinguishes four key roles that characterize the behavior of US President Donald J. Trump. These roles – observer, performer, controller and disruptor – provide an interpretative framework for a deeper understanding of how he approaches negotiations and the exercise of power.

#### **i. Trump as observer**

Trump places particular emphasis on studying the strengths and weaknesses of his opponents, considering knowledge of their motives, resources and limitations to be crucial; he does not share them, he assesses them. In his opinion, keen observation of interpersonal relationships is the key to successful negotiation. Although negotiation theorists advocate empathy and understanding of common interests, Trump's

philosophy differs in essence, as he perceives the process as a game of confrontation and competition, in which victory comes through superiority rather than agreement. As he himself has stated: "*When they're on the other side of the table, that's what they are — they are an opponent*" (Kogan, 2019, p.67).

## **ii. Trump as performer**

For Trump, "performance" is a tool of power. He seeks media attention and is always conscious of his audience and the power of his public image. He uses the media, social media and, more generally, public discourse to increase his negotiating leverage, often feigning indifference or making high demands in order to set the terms of the negotiation to his advantage. His strategy of "asking for everything" and "keeping room to retreat" shows his intention to control the narrative and shape his opponents' expectations, with the ultimate goal of getting the most out of the negotiations.

## **iii. Trump as controller**

Trump's need for complete control is evident both in his decision-making and in the flow of information. He advocates a hierarchical, centralized model of management, in which he alone can control and influence final decisions – as he does not consider leadership to be a collective process. His leadership style – top-down decision-making – aims for efficiency without bureaucracy and demonstrates complete accountability. As Trump himself has stated: "*As soon as you take responsibility for all that you touch, the power is in your hands to make it extraordinary. For me, having that sense of control has been a catalyst for success*" (Kogan, 2019, p. 69).

## **iv. Trump as disrupter**

President Trump is driven by his instincts, action-oriented and tolerant of risk. He can manage ambiguity, seeking to maximize uncertainty for others but minimize it for himself. In other words, he prefers to maintain an unpredictable stance towards his opponents, a choice that is also a conscious tactic, as he believes that his ambiguity gives him a negotiating advantage. At the same time, he seeks absolute clarity, avoids

unpleasant surprises for himself, never reveals all his cards and always remains "ready for battle".

### **Donald Trump's strategy towards China:**

#### **A comparative analysis of his two terms in office**

During Donald Trump's first term, the American strategy towards China followed a confrontational and coercive approach, integrated into the broader framework of the *America First* policy. It combined tariffs, restrictions on technological flows, harsh public rhetoric and negotiation through escalating coercion, with the aim of addressing structural imbalances in trade, the forced transfer of know-how and state aid to Chinese companies – factors that the Trump administration considered to be undermining American competitiveness (Allison, 2017). Returning to power in 2025, the coercive logic of the Trump administration remains, but the strategy appears more flexible and operationally broader. It combines massive tariffs and economic pressure, strict technological controls and restrictions, and efforts to build alternative chains of critical resources.

The application of tariffs was – and continues to be – not just a tool of protectionism, but also a high-risk negotiating tactic designed to put excessive pressure on China. Between 2017 and 2021, the government increased the average tariff on imports from China to around 20% (from 3% before the trade war), escalating in four rounds and reaching levels of 10–25% (Bown, 2025). Since 2025, tariffs have become more variable and targeted, initially reaching levels of up to 145% for certain products. However, due to market pressures, there was a rapid reduction to around 10–30%, although for some items it still reaches 50–60% (Huld, 2025), while China's non-passive stance led to the imposition of counter-tariffs. It is interesting that Trump chose to lift selected surcharges, thus creating a mix of pressure and reward. The logic of CN – credible cost threats to change the opponent's behavior – is clearly reflected in this case: tariffs act as "costly signals", increasing the price of non-compliance and showing that the US could and can bear short-term economic costs for strategic gains. This policy demonstrated that Trump – acting in the role of *controller* – perceives tariffs as

a permanent mechanism of control and negotiation, with the aim of managing decisions centrally, controlling the escalation and intensity of measures himself, with questionable results, however.

Targeting highly dependent sectors (e.g. technology and telecommunications), the Trump administration imposed restrictions on access to American components on leading companies such as ZTE<sup>1</sup> (2018) and Huawei<sup>2</sup> (2019). These moves shook the sustainability of these companies and highlighted the high degree of American dependence, confirming the president's role as *controller*. During his second term, the American President seems to be placing greater emphasis on restrictions on critical technologies and software and on the security of critical natural resources and rare earths, seeking to slow Chinese growth in areas such as artificial intelligence and semiconductors. The systematic use of critical metals and raw materials as a bargaining chip, focuses on coordinating policies to strengthen the supply chain of critical minerals in the US, with the aim of reducing global dependence on Chinese supplies. However, in recent months there has been a mutual suspension of certain measures. Indeed, Beijing and Washington have agreed to a temporary truce (not a full agreement) during their bilateral meeting in South Korea on 30 October 2025, agreeing to reduce selected tariffs, suspend restrictions on rare earth exports and partially lift port charges (Huld & Zhou, 2025). This development does not constitute a strategic shift, but is consistent with Trump's logic as an observer; in both terms, he carefully assesses his opponent's weaknesses and limitations, identifies points of dependence, and makes selective concessions in order to redesign his policy line and maintain the initiative in negotiations.

At the same time, the public management of Trump's strategy differs between his two terms in office: while Twitter dominated the first, the second mainly uses Truth Social, where self-contradictory and escalating statements cause strategic uncertainty. Through his posts, ultimatums and demands, Trump sets the agenda, directs expectations, sends messages to Beijing and makes public commitments, making the threat more credible and retreat politically painful. This approach is a kind of psychological game and is a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-44825878>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/trump-administration-hits-chinas-huawei-with-one-two-punch-idUSKCN1SL2QX/>

typical example of Trump's actions as *an executor*, as a president who uses his public image and theatricality on the one hand to increase pressure on his opponent, and on the other hand to negotiate. This is a standard Trump tactic, which is part of his rhetoric of "*threat that leaves something to chance*" and which reminds China of the serious possibility of uncontrolled escalation.

Also, during the first term, the Phase One Trade Agreement (January 2020) was signed, in which China committed to increased US imports and intellectual property reforms in exchange for a partial relaxation of tariffs (Bown, 2021). Despite proclamations of a "*historic trade agreement*" (Trump, 2020), its implementation revealed inherent limitations and an inability to resolve structural imbalances, while confirming the coherence of Trump's strategy in terms of cost provocation and the systematic cultivation of strategic uncertainty. This approach, based on Trump's role as *a disrupter*, maximizes uncertainty for his opponents and minimizes the negotiating risk for himself, ensuring a lasting strategic advantage. In his second term, the same strategic logic is gradually escalating, with the American President exploiting uncertainty as a permanent lever for power reshaping, with Washington maintaining the initiative. His current strategy is characterized by controlled ambiguity, high risk tolerance, sudden unilateral moves and constantly changing signals to Beijing. This is a non-consensual strategy of pressure, through which Trump is establishing a variation of institutionalized uncertainty.

### **Concluding remarks**

Although both of Trump's terms in office utilized CN as a mechanism for exercising foreign policy, the first presidential term inaugurated an empirical and reactive version of coercive strategy, while the second represents a more mature, institutionalized and systematic extension of it, reflecting both the realignment of the international system and the lessons learned during the period 2017–2021. In this context, CN ceases to function exclusively as a tool for trade negotiations and becomes a means of geo-economic reform of the Sino-American relationship.

During his first term, Trump sought – through tariffs, technological access restrictions and supply chain restructuring – to change certain Chinese practices and reduce American economic dependence on China, while limiting Beijing's ability to leverage its economic power for strategic gains (Aktar, 2025). However, despite the short-term pressure exerted, the strategy failed to bring about lasting behavioral changes and was characterized by inconsistency and symmetrical cost allocation – both China and the US suffered significant repercussions – limiting the effectiveness of CN. Overall, the CN of the 2017–2021 period can be assessed as partially successful but strategically incomplete.

In his second term, Trump's approach became more theatrical and aggressive, with systematic cost imposition and displays of determination (Hudson, 2025). Nevertheless, from the very first year, American credibility appears shaken, while China – unyielding in its basic positions – reproduces competition and reveals the limits of CN, in an environment of prolonged mutual pressure (Smolinski, etc., 2025).

Overall, the central predictions of CN are confirmed in both terms: systematic use of cost imposition (tariffs, export and technology restrictions), threats with controlled uncertainty (intermittent postponements and temporary suspensions) and a combination of pressure with selective concessions (tariffs and temporary tariff suspensions). However, the effectiveness of the strategy is undermined by three structural factors:

- i. China acts as a resilient opponent with a strong industrial and technological base, making tariffs a tool for pressure but not for behavioral change.
- ii. China is not remaining passive; it is responding with countermeasures, investing in strategic autonomy (semiconductors, critical supply chains) and gradually reducing its vulnerability.
- iii. The high cost to the US itself limits the political sustainability of coercion, while repeated suspensions of measures undermine the coherence and credibility of pressure.

Trump's CN ends up producing a stabilization of competition rather than strategic compliance. China adapts, strengthens itself and learns to absorb pressure, leading to a

balance of mutual coercion that limits the long-term effectiveness of the American strategy.

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