

The Architecture of Coercion: A Theory of Systemic Power

by Davor Moravek

Abstract

*Traditional international relations scholarship has privileged the study of overt military force as the principal instrument of coercion. This paper develops a broader theoretical framework, termed **systemic coercion**, to analyze the often non-military, structural pressures that powerful state actors exert over weaker ones. Distinct from concepts like structural violence or neo-colonialism through its focus on the strategic integration of multiple power modalities, systemic coercion operates through an **enforced dependency ecosystem**. This dynamic is frequently amplified when a hegemonic power enters a phase of relative decline, leading to a strategic shift toward indirect methods of influence maintenance (Kennedy, 1987; Gilpin, 1981). The theory posits an integrated **architecture of coercion** resting on three pillars: **weaponized infrastructure**, **manipulated institutions**, and **psychological domination**. This paper deconstructs this architecture, examining its core mechanisms, historical antecedents, and the asymmetric strategies of resistance it engenders, concluding with an assessment of its psychological toll and the challenge of establishing a more stable, symmetrical international equilibrium.*

Keywords: Systemic Coercion, Asymmetrical Power, International Relations Theory, Structural Violence, Hegemony, Institutional Capture, Cognitive Warfare, Neo-colonialism, Engineered Dependency, Geopolitics of Infrastructure, Sharp Power, Digital Authoritarianism

Introduction: Reconceptualizing Coercion in World Politics

The contemporary global landscape necessitates a more nuanced framework for understanding the exercise of state power. This paper moves beyond classic definitions of coercion, which center on direct threats (Schelling, 1966), to illuminate the structural pressures that define modern geopolitical competition. We introduce the concept of **systemic coercion** as the strategic use of asymmetrical power to compel or constrain the behavior of other states, often without the overt application of military force (Pape, 1997).

Unlike concepts such as soft power (Nye, 2004) or economic statecraft (Baldwin, 1985), systemic coercion explains how power operates through **enforced dependency ecosystems** rather than attraction or discrete transactions. While sharing features with "sharp power" (Walker, 2018) in its use of manipulation, and "networked authoritarianism" (Feldstein, 2021) in its digital dimension, systemic coercion is distinct in its architectural integration of *all three pillars*—infrastructural, institutional, and psychological—as a holistic system of domination. It functions through both conscious strategy and the exploitation of emergent structural asymmetries, where long-term dependency creates a condition of *necessity* that constrains the target's choices. This moves beyond "coercion-as-extortion" (explicit threats) to encompass "**coercion-as-control**" (implicit structural constraints).

This dynamic often intensifies when a great power perceives its hegemonic status to be eroding. An **empire in decline** may shift from confident power projection to more indirect tactics to

preserve its position, trading long-term systemic legitimacy for short-term coercive efficiency in a classic hegemonic paradox (Gilpin, 1981).

Comparative Coercion Models	Schelling (1966)	Moravek (This Paper)
Primary Mechanism	Explicit threats; application of force.	Integrated architecture of structural dependency.
Logic of Action	Coercion-as-extortion (threats to alter behavior).	Coercion-as-control (shaping the environment of necessity).
Scope	Primarily military and diplomatic statecraft.	Multi-scalar: infrastructural, institutional, and psychological.

The architecture of coercion rests on three pillars:

Weaponized Infrastructure: The strategic transformation of physical and digital networks into instruments of structural dependency.

Manipulated Institutions: The subversion of multilateral bodies, legal regimes, and norms to neutralize accountability and legitimize repression.

Psychological Domination: The application of pervasive pressure—from cognitive warfare to engineered trauma—to foster institutional distrust and learned helplessness.

This paper will first outline the core theoretical principles of systemic coercion. It will then deconstruct this architecture by examining its tangible expressions in infrastructure (Part I), its institutional machinery (Part II), its historical antecedents (Part III), the innovative strategies of resistance it provokes (Part IV), and its profound psychological impacts (Part V).

A Theoretical Framework of Systemic Coercion

When sovereign entities leverage structural advantages to impose their will, the resulting dynamic is not mere aggression but **systemic coercion**—an embedded phenomenon operating through interconnected layers of power and vulnerability.

I. Foundational Mechanisms of Coercive Architecture

Institutional Capture (*Pillar II: Manipulated Institutions*): The aggressor exploits *legalized hegemony* to exempt itself from accountability. The veto power mechanism in premier security councils enables great powers to block actions against their interests, transforming institutions designed for collective security into tools of impunity (Krisch, 2005). This reflects Gerry Simpson's (2004) concept of "unequal sovereigns," where formal sovereignty coexists with hierarchical privilege.

Engineered Dependency (*Pillar I: Weaponized Infrastructure*): The deliberate construction of

lopsided interdependencies (e.g., energy grids, financial networks, technological ecosystems) that grant coercive leverage. Targets become entrapped by design, and compliance is extracted not through direct force but via engineered necessity, a concept rooted in Hirschman's (1945) seminal work on the influence effect of foreign trade.

Procedural Weaponization (*Pillar II: Manipulated Institutions*): Powerful actors exploit jurisdictional ambiguities to select dispute-resolution venues that favor their interests, a practice known as *forum shopping* (Alter & Meunier, 2009). This allows them to neutralize oversight by shifting from multilateral bodies to more easily influenced bilateral or regional forums.

II. Modalities and Expressions of Coercion

Cognitive Warfare (*Pillar III: Psychological Domination*): Dominant actors leverage their control over epistemic frameworks to reframe aggression as legitimacy. This includes the construction of *civilizational threat narratives* (e.g., the "outlaw state" paradigm) to justify intervention (Simpson, 2004). This extends beyond propaganda to actively disrupting a target's societal cohesion, decision-making calculus, and collective identity (Horowitz, 2020).

Normative Domination (*Pillars I & II*): The imposition of technical, legal, or regulatory standards that lock targets into permanent subsidiary roles. This includes the use of a dominant language as the *lingua franca* in international organizations, which implicitly reinforces the legal and cultural norms of the hegemon (Thiong'o, 1986). Modern *technical harmonization* programs project regulatory power globally, compelling others to adopt the hegemon's standards to gain market access (Bradford, 2020).

Coercive Intermediation (*Pillar I & II*): Third-party entities are coerced into isolating targets through cascading penalties. The use of extraterritorial sanctions that threaten exclusion from critical financial networks creates a chokehold that amplifies pressure far beyond direct bilateral leverage (Drezner, 2015).

Instrumentalized Corruption (*Pillar II*): The deliberate use of corruption—bribery, elite co-optation, and opaque financial dealings—to weaken a target state from within. Drawing from the concept of "Byzantine Diplomacy," this involves using complexity and intrigue as a weapon to paralyze an adversary's political system (Luttwak, 2009; Chayes, 2015).

III. Amplifiers of Systemic Vulnerability

Internalized Subordination (*Pillar III: Psychological Domination*): Targets self-censor or preemptively align with coercive demands to avoid retaliation. This anticipatory obedience normalizes hierarchy and makes coercion self-sustaining (Scott, 1985). In post-colonial contexts, this is amplified by historical trauma, reflecting Frantz Fanon's (1961) analysis of the "colonized psyche."

Systemic Contagion: Unchecked coercion incentivizes emulation by other powers, proliferating the model and evolving localized imbalances into networked hierarchies of influence (Wendt, 1992).

Resilience Sabotage (*Pillar I*): Critical infrastructure, knowledge systems, or supply chains are kept deliberately fragile or dependent to prevent the emergence of genuine autonomy. This includes tactics of *developmental throttling*, where colonial powers actively suppressed manufacturing capabilities in resource-rich regions to ensure perpetual raw material dependency

(Rodney, 1972).

IV. Counter-Systems and Architectures of Resistance

Sovereignty Diffusion: Reducing monocultural dependencies through strategic diversification of alliances, the construction of redundant systems, and engagement in pooled resource governance to dilute coercive leverage.

Normative Anchoring: Formalizing abstract principles (e.g., reciprocity, proportionality) in binding legal and political instruments to override pure power politics with a logic of appropriateness (Manners, 2002; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Stealth Autonomy: Developing unobtrusive counter-infrastructure (e.g., decentralized networks, parallel payment systems) that operates below the threshold of coercive scrutiny, enabling agency without triggering retaliation.

Part I: Weaponized Infrastructure and Engineered Dependency

The physical and digital networks that underpin the global economy have become central arenas of geopolitical competition. This section analyzes how these systems are strategically deployed as instruments of systemic coercion. While colonial-era physical grids (e.g., railways) enabled resource extraction, modern *digital* infrastructure (e.g., cloud ecosystems, data flows) facilitates coercion at a greater scale, speed, and level of intimacy, enabling the direct shaping of societal discourse and individual behavior.

Energy as a Tool of Asymmetrical Interdependence

The weaponization of energy flows is a primary manifestation of **Engineered Dependency**. This practice is best understood through the concept of **asymmetrical interdependence**, where an unequal relationship of mutual dependence grants the less dependent actor a significant political resource (Keohane & Nye, 2012). A dominant, energy-exporting state can leverage its near-monopolistic position to exert control over dependent consumer nations by manipulating the threat of a supply cutoff. The effectiveness of this asymmetrical power projection hinges on the distinction between **sensitivity** (the costs of disruption) and **vulnerability** (the availability of policy alternatives).

Infrastructural Grand Strategy: The Geopolitics of Debt and Data

Ambitious, large-scale infrastructure initiatives represent another form of **Engineered Dependency**, often combined with **Resilience Sabotage**. For example, a rising power's financing of a strategic port in a developing nation (Pillar I) can be coupled with debt contracts that stipulate arbitration in the creditor's legal forums (Pillar II), while state-sponsored media frames the project as purely altruistic development aid (Pillar III). This illustrates the integrated nature of the coercive architecture. It should be noted, however, that this framework does not preclude agency; recipient states often engage in strategic partnerships to balance dependencies and extract concessions, resisting a purely passive role.

1. Debt-Leveraged Coercion: This strategy involves extending massive, often unsustainable, loans for large-scale projects. When the borrower struggles with repayment, the creditor

leverages the debt to extract concessions, including long-term control over strategic assets (Chellaney, 2017).

2. The Export of Techno-Political Standards: A more systemic mechanism is the export of techno-political standards, an expression of **Normative Domination**. By building a country's digital backbone, a powerful state creates **standards lock-in**, making recipient nations dependent on its firms for maintenance and upgrades, facilitating the export of **authoritarian informationalism** (Feldstein, 2021).

Part II: Institutional Manipulation and the Statecraft of Impunity

Systemic coercion also operates through the manipulation of intangible systems: multilateral institutions, legal frameworks, and transnational networks. This framework acknowledges that powerful non-state actors, such as large technology corporations controlling critical digital infrastructure, can also engage in systemic coercion by setting de facto rules, controlling information flows, and creating dependencies that mirror state-led tactics.

Weaponizing Global Governance and International Law

The very institutions designed to maintain peace can be co-opted through **Institutional Capture** and **Procedural Weaponization**. A premier global security council, in particular, can become a venue where the veto power is wielded to shield allies from accountability. This is mirrored in the economic sphere through **lawfare**, where dominance over financial "chokepoints" allows for the imposition of crippling sanctions, a form of **Coercive Intermediation**. A contemporary example of the integrated architecture involves a state imposing sanctions on a target for alleged illicit activities (Pillar II), enforcing these sanctions through its control over global financial messaging systems (Pillar I), and justifying the action through a widespread media campaign about the target's threat to global security (Pillar III).

This is often paired with **Cognitive Warfare**, where fabricated threats and false casus belli are constructed to provide a veneer of legitimacy for aggressive actions. By controlling the narrative, a powerful state can frame its coercion as a necessary response to a manufactured crisis, preemptively delegitimizing any opposition.

Authoritarian Counter-Institutions and Instrumentalized Corruption

In response to institutional pressure, a network of authoritarian states has emerged to neutralize sanctions. These **Authoritarian Counter-Institutions** or cooperative networks demonstrate **Systemic Contagion**, where unchecked coercion incentivizes emulation and cooperation among malign actors. This cooperation often employs **Instrumentalized Corruption**, using opaque financial flows and elite co-optation to weaken adversaries from within (Luttwak, 2009; Chayes, 2015).

Part III: Historical Roots: Post-Colonial Legacies and Path Dependency

The architecture of modern systemic coercion often finds its blueprints in historical colonial

relationships, demonstrating long-term **Engineered Dependency**.

Neo-Colonialism and Enduring Economic Subordination

Neo-colonialism describes a system where a state is theoretically independent but its economic policy is directed from outside (Nkrumah, 1965). A stark example is a colonial-era monetary dependency system requiring reserves to be held in metropolitan banks, perpetuating economic subordination long after nominal independence. This exemplifies **engineered necessity**, where targets comply because alternative systems have been systematically undermined through **Resilience Sabotage**.

The Sensory Infrastructure of Control

The legacy of colonialism extends to the "sensory infrastructure" used to control populations. This has evolved from the colonial-era census and segregated urban planning to modern digital surveillance. In a post-colonial city, modern surveillance systems are often layered directly onto the physical and ideological foundations of older colonial control structures. The goal has remained consistent: to render the population legible and controllable (Scott, 1998).

Part IV: Architectures of Resistance: Countering Systemic Coercion

Systemic coercion invariably provokes responses. These are not merely reactions but agentic, transformative acts that can reshape coercive structures, affirming the constructivist insight that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992). However, the effectiveness of resistance is often constrained by the very power asymmetries the framework describes. Strategies of **Sovereignty Diffusion** may succeed in diversifying minor dependencies but often fail to challenge core structural imbalances, while **Normative Anchoring** can be dismissed by powerful actors operating outside the bounds of established legal regimes.

Typology of Resistance Strategies

Resistance often manifests as a deliberate strategy to diffuse dependency and build autonomous capacity. This can involve creating or joining **transnational advocacy networks** that mobilize international pressure and shame coercive actors (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Coercion Type	Resistance Strategy & Conceptual Case	Theoretical Principle
Infrastructure Lock-in	Strategic investment in diversified, sovereign energy sources (e.g., geothermal) to bypass fossil fuel coercion.	<i>Sovereignty Diffusion</i>
Cognitive Warfare	Creation of independent cultural archives (e.g., dance, oral history) to preserve knowledge outside hegemonic canons.	<i>Stealth Cultural Autonomy</i>
Institutional Paralysis	Use of alternative legal forums and ad hoc coalitions to pursue normative claims (e.g., climate reparations).	<i>Normative Anchoring</i>

Normative Re-anchoring as Asymmetric Leverage

Resistance is not limited to material strategies. States can generate influence by embracing **Normative Anchoring**. Demilitarized states, for example, have historically gained diplomatic influence by embodying *principled exceptionalism*. Their credibility as neutral mediators creates *asymmetric moral leverage* against coercive powers, allowing them to project influence far beyond their material capabilities (Manners, 2002).

Part V: The Psychological Pillar: Cognitive Subjugation and Trauma

Sustained coercion inflicts deep and lasting wounds on the collective psyche of a society, forming the most pervasive pillar of the coercive architecture.

Mechanisms of Psychological and Cognitive Subjugation

Cognitive Colonization: Post-colonial education systems often perpetuated metropole-defined knowledge canons, devaluing local epistemes. This entrenches *intellectual dependency* and reinforces epistemic hierarchies. As Thiong'o (1986) argues, the imposition of a colonial language disrupts intergenerational cultural memory, shaping the very parameters of thought and possibility.

Engineered Collective Trauma: This must be distinguished from **strategic compliance**, which is a rational calculation by elites. Collective trauma is a deeper, generational wound inflicted by policies like structural adjustment programs—often enforced through **Institutional Capture** of international financial bodies. The resulting hyperinflation, collapse of public services, and widespread precarity create *crisis generations* characterized by institutional cynicism.

Learned Helplessness vs. Psychological Resilience: While the psychological model of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) helps explain **Internalized Subordination**, it must be contrasted with theories of psychological resilience. The establishment of truth commissions or other transitional justice mechanisms can function as a cognitive counter-strategy, allowing societies to reclaim their historical narrative and resist the internalization of victimhood.

Conclusion: Toward a Theory of Symmetrical Interdependence

Systemic coercion's longevity stems from its **self-reinforcing triad**:

1. **Structural Asymmetry** (engineered power gradients)
2. **Epistemic Obfuscation** (masked operations and manufactured legitimacy)
3. **Psychological Internalization** (learned helplessness and cognitive colonization)

Breaking this cycle requires a fundamental re-architecting of the international system. The proposals below, while ambitious, highlight the direction of change required, though their implementation faces significant political obstacles from actors who benefit from the current asymmetrical order. Symmetrical interdependence is not an idealistic endpoint but a system with built-in checks and balances, such as decentralized governance models and multi-polar dependencies, that make the weaponization of any single node more difficult. Feasible pathways include the development of interoperable, but not centralized, cross-border payment systems using central bank digital currencies, and the creation of regional energy grids that prioritize redundancy over single-source efficiency.

Counter-Infrastructural Pluralism: Fostering parallel systems in finance (central bank digital currencies), energy (decentralized microgrids), and data (mesh networks) to reduce chokepoint vulnerability.

Normative Institutional Innovation: Designing binding arbitration bodies with *rotating, veto-proof governance* to neutralize institutional paralysis and forum shopping.

Trauma-Informed Diplomacy: Recognizing collective psychological harm as a legitimate dimension of post-conflict justice by incorporating mechanisms like historical memory projects and educational reforms into diplomatic settlements.

The ultimate goal is not merely resisting coercion but architecting **positive-sum ecosystems** where power asymmetries cannot be so easily weaponized. This necessitates a concerted effort to dismantle the *psycho-institutional legacies* that sustain coercive equilibria through acts of **cognitive decolonization**, such as the revival of indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

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