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THE RELUCTANT AND THE COMPLIANT: ELITE COMPETITION, SOCIAL CLEAVAGE, AND THE DOMESTIC LIMITS OF GREAT-POWER COMPELLENCE

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Abstract

Why do some weak states give in to a great power's demands while others, just as exposed, refuse and gain at home for refusing? This article puts the answer in the target's domestic politics rather than in the coercer's strength. A foreign demand does not reach a single government adding up costs and benefits; it drops into a running fight among elites, where any concession can be picked up by a rival and used as a weapon. Whether that danger is real depends on two things: how far the regime can insulate the leader from a mobilized opposition, and whether the demand activates a politically organized social cleavage. Methodologically the article is a small-n plausibility probe rather than a test: three cases, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Brazil, are chosen to vary regime type and cleavage activation while holding the coercer and the instrument, the United States tariff campaign of 2025, roughly constant, and the causal claim is advanced through within-case reasoning and counterfactuals rather than across a large sample. Indonesia and Vietnam complied within weeks; Brazil refused, and its president's standing rose. Power barely varied across the three. Their domestic politics did.

Keywords: Compellence, coercive diplomacy, domestic politics, social cleavage, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

In the first half of 2025 the United States conducted one of the largest exercises in economic compellence in recent memory. Beginning with the "Liberation Day" announcement of April 2, the Trump administration issued a sequence of tariff threats to dozens of trading partners, each in the form of a demand: open your market, buy American goods, change the offending policy, or pay a punitive rate on everything you sell to the United States (Manak & Smith, 2026). The instrument was uniform, the asymmetry of power was overwhelming in nearly every case, and the threat of consequences was explicit. Yet the targets answered differently, and in a way the crude logic of power cannot explain.

Indonesia, threatened with thirty-two percent, folded within weeks, taking nineteen percent in exchange for opening almost its whole market and committing to buy American energy, farm goods, and aircraft; Prabowo Subianto called the deal a new era of mutual benefit (White House, 2025). Vietnam faced a steeper threat and moved faster still (Breuninger, 2025). Brazil, hit with fifty percent, refused outright, called the tariff an attack on its sovereignty, threatened to retaliate, and watched its president's approval climb (Guimarães, 2025). Roughly the same pressure, applied to three weaker states by the same great power, produced rapid compliance in two and a profitable defiance in the third.

This article aims to explain that divergence. This article claims that whether compellence works is based less on the coercer's capabilities or the credibility of its threats than on the structure of political competition inside the target. A demand from abroad does not land on a unitary state weighing national costs and benefits. Instead, it lands in the middle of a contest among elites, and it becomes part of the contest, a bludgeon to score political points. The leader's question is not only what the demand will cost the country but what each answer will cost him against the people who want his job. Whether saying yes is dangerous depends on two things: how far the regime can shield the leader from a mobilized opposition, and whether the demand activates a cleavage an opposition can organize around.

The argument does not reject the rationalist account of coercion built on capabilities, credibility, and the balance of resolve (Schelling, 1966; George, Hall, & Simons, 1971). It accepts that machinery and adds a prior question that the machinery does not address, namely what a demand does inside the target before the target ever computes a national cost. In that sense it extends rather than overturns the audience-cost tradition (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007): where audience-cost theory asks how domestic publics let a leader signal resolve, the argument here asks how a domestic rivalry shapes whether a leader can afford to comply at all. It is a synthesis of coercion theory with the comparative politics of regime type and cleavage. The discussion

proceeds in four steps: the literature and the gap; the research design; the argument and its scope conditions; and the three cases.

Compellence and Its Domestic Turn

For much of the Cold War the study of coercion was the study of deterrence. Persuading an adversary not to act drew most of the attention, while the harder problem, getting it to undo something done or to do what it would rather avoid, sat off to one side. Schelling (1966) drew the line cleanly: deterrence waits, compellence has to start the clock, and compellence is harder because it asks for a visible and sometimes humiliating reversal rather than mere inaction. George, Hall, and Simons (1971) produced a generation of case work on when coercion succeeds, naming a clear and limited demand, a lopsided stake, a credible threat, and a carrot offered with the stick.

Since then, scholars have expanded on the study with datasets of its own and unsettled arguments about what should count as success (Byman & Waxman, 2002; Sperandei, 2006; Sechser & Fuhrmann, 2017). Sechser and Fuhrmann's finding that nuclear superiority buys surprisingly little compellent leverage is only the sharpest of these, and the inquiry has carried into the present, from coercive bargaining inside alliances (Blankenship, 2023) to post-mortems of failed pressure campaigns such as the Trump administrations against Iran (Kamel, 2024). The economic side of coercion has its own state-of-the-art, surveyed by Drezner (2024) and organized lately around the way states weaponize the networks of interdependence they sit astride (Farrell & Newman, 2019, 2023), of which the 2025 tariff campaign is a blunt instance.

Three explanations bear directly on the present argument, and it helps to map them rather than list them. The first is rationalist and capabilities-centered: outcomes follow from the balance of interests, the credibility of threats, and who can hurt whom (Schelling, 1966; George et al., 1971). The second is the domestic audiences variable: leaders are constrained and enabled by the publics that can punish them, which lets democracies signal resolve through audience costs (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007), extends the same logic to how autocracies absorb and react to threats (Weeks, 2008; Li & Chen,

2021; Weiss, 2014), and reaches even to how domestic choices unrelated to foreign policy shape a leader's international reputation (Goldfien, Joseph, & McManus, 2023). The third runs through leaders' political survival: rulers act abroad to hold the coalition that keeps them in power (Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003), and in the developing world they align to fend off the domestic threats most likely to unseat them (David, 1991).

The present argument sits closest to the third and borrows the second's attention to domestic punishment, but it differs from both in object. The survival literature asks which side a leader takes; audience-cost theory asks how a public lets a leader commit. This article asks a narrower question that neither answers head-on: when a great power makes a contentious demand, what determines whether the leader can say yes, and the answer lies in the interaction of two variables the next section defines.

Already there have been some works that tackle the domestic politics within coercion theory itself. Jentleson and Whytock (2005), reconstructing the long American effort against Libya, build the target's vulnerability into the model and give domestic elites a transmission-belt or circuit-breaker role: they can carry outside pressure into the leadership's thinking or block it. Schultz (2001) shows that democratic governments, exposed to oppositions, both wield and absorb threats differently from those that are not. A related strand turns to the sender's own public, finding that how a coercive measure is framed and who endorses it shape how much support it draws at home (Blauberger, Makaradze, & Spilker, 2026). What none of this work specifies is what makes a concession explosive inside the target in the first place, and comparative politics supplies the missing piece. Mass publics are ordinarily inattentive to foreign policy (Lippmann, 1997; Mueller, 1973); what rouses them is a cleavage an elite can organize around (Snyder, 2000), and such cleavages turn dangerous most readily where institutions are thin and the rules contested, in soft authoritarian regimes and in young or emerging democracies (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Mansfield & Snyder, 2005). The contribution here is to fuse these strands: to treat the target's politics not as

a single dial of vulnerability but as a contest, and to specify what pulls a foreign demand into it.

Research Design

The article is a small-n comparison used as a plausibility probe, in Eckstein's (1975) original sense, a study meant to establish whether a candidate mechanism is worth taking seriously and worth the cost of a larger test, not to confirm it (Levy, 2008). The point is worth stating plainly because the burden a plausibility probe carries is different from the burden of a hypothesis test. It is asked to show a mechanism operating in the open across cases that vary, to make a rival explanation look strained, and to specify what a fuller test would have to do. It is not asked, and is not able, to estimate how much of the variance the mechanism explains (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007).

Three cases are chosen to vary the two features the argument makes central while holding the coercer and the instrument roughly fixed. All three were far weaker than the United States, all three depended on the American market, and all three drew a steep tariff letter in the same season of 2025, so the coercer's leverage is held near constant by design. What varies is regime strength, running from one-party Vietnam through leader-dominated Indonesia to polarized Brazil, and, across the three, whether the demand reached a politically organized cleavage. The chief rival explanation, that outcomes track capabilities and exposure, is controlled in two ways: it is held roughly constant across the cases, and it is tested against the within-case counterfactuals offered below, where the same power configuration is shown to yield a different predicted outcome once the domestic variables change.

Two limits should be admitted at the outset. First, the design selects on cases where the mechanism is legible, which is appropriate for a probe but is the reason a probe cannot stand in for a representative sample. Second, the evidence here is drawn from public reporting, government statements, polling, and policy analysis, not from elite interviews, parliamentary archives, or an original dataset. That is a real constraint on how finely the causal process can

be traced, and the conclusion returns to it as the first item on the research agenda the argument implies.

The Argument

First, the players. One set of elites holds the government; another wants it and watches for an opening. Both rest on constituencies. When a foreign demand arrives it becomes a counter in that game, and the governing elite weighs not just the national cost of yes or no but what either answer does to its hold on power.

Two variables govern whether compliance is safe, and both need a tighter definition than the narrative alone would give, to avoid stretching them to fit (Sartori, 1970). The first is regime strength, which here means one thing specifically: the leader's capacity to insulate himself from a mobilized opposition. It is not institutional consolidation in the abstract, nor elite dominance as such, but the practical ability to keep a concession from being turned into a force that removes him. That capacity has two sources, and a regime needs only one. A leader can be electorally secure, commanding so wide a coalition that no rival can assemble a punishing majority, or he can be coercively capable, holding the means to suppress or sideline the opposition that would punish him. Consolidated democracies have the first, entrenched authoritarian states the second, and both are therefore hard to coerce through this channel. The vulnerable regimes are those with neither in full, the soft authoritarian and the young democracy, where the leader can neither out-vote nor silence the rivals a concession would arm. The shape of the claim has a precedent in the audience-cost literature, where the capacity to generate credible domestic costs runs highest at moderate instability and falls toward both the consolidated and the most unstable extremes (Yu, Whang, & Lee, 2022).

The second variable is cleavage activation, and it too must be bounded. By social cleavage the argument does not mean any latent line of difference in a society; it means a division that is already politically organized, around which a rival elite and an identifiable constituency are mobilized and ready to move. Ethnic, religious, regional, and partisan divisions can all serve, but only

when they are live in this sense, and the cases below treat partisan polarization as carrying the same weight as an ethnic or religious split when it structures elite competition as sharply, which is the Brazilian situation. A demand that touches no organized cleavage is largely inert; a demand that lands on one wakes the constituency attached to it and hands the rival a weapon. Cleavage activation can override regime strength: even a leader who is electorally secure will be exposed if a demand strikes the one division his rivals are already organized to exploit.

So the leader calculates his own survival, not the national interest as a strategist would draw it up. Handed a demand whose acceptance would arm a rival, he refuses one he might privately have granted. Handed a demand that is itself a gift to a rival, because it lights up the cleavage that rival stands on, he finds that open defiance is the safe move. The logic is a cousin of David's (1991) omnibalancing, in which leaders choose foreign alignments to fend off the enemies most likely to remove them; the difference is the question, since David asks which great power a leader runs to and this article asks whether he does what a great power tells him. The answer lies in the same place, in the leader's need to deny rivals the standing the wrong answer would furnish.

Scope Conditions

The mechanism has limits, and naming them keeps it from sliding into the platitude that domestic politics matters. Three conditions must hold. The target's survival cannot be on the line, or necessity overrides the domestic calculus. The demand must be visible at home and must touch an organized cleavage, since a demand that wakes no one sets nothing in motion. And there must be a real rival, an opposition with a base and a voice; remove it and there is no contest for the demand to fall into.

DISCUSSION

Indonesia: The Dominant Leader Who Could Afford to Deal

Indonesia complied fast. It drew one of the heavier rates on April 2, thirty-two percent, saw it drop to the ten percent floor during the ninety-day

pause, then watched the thirty-two percent return in a July letter dated for an August 1 deadline (Manak & Smith, 2026). Jakarta did not wait. Airlangga Hartarto, the coordinating minister for economic affairs, led weeks of talks in Washington from late April, and once Prabowo Subianto had spoken with Trump by phone the two governments announced a framework in mid-July: nineteen percent on Indonesian goods, near-zero duties on more than ninety-nine percent of American exports, commitments on labor and on forced-labor imports, and purchases of fifteen billion dollars in American energy, four and a half billion in farm products, and fifty Boeing aircraft (White House, 2025). The terms were settled over the following weeks and signed as a full agreement in February 2026.

The deal was lopsided, and whether Indonesian economic nationalism was simply absent deserves a direct answer, because the record neither shows strong nationalist mobilization nor warrants the claim that there was none. There was pointed criticism from analysts who called the terms asymmetric and the negotiation a near-failure, arguing that the purchase commitments fell on the agriculture and energy sectors and that the headline rate matched what several neighbors obtained without comparable concessions (Arifianto & Raditio, 2026). Prabowo felt the criticism enough to answer it in public, insisting that the deal protected jobs and snapping that "constructive criticism is welcome, but constant cynicism doesn't help" (Saputra, 2025).

What did not happen is that the criticism never found a constituency or a cleavage to ride, and the reasons are concrete rather than assumed. Indonesia's trade with the United States is complementary rather than competitive, so opening the market created few domestic losers; nearly ninety percent of imports from the United States already faced very low tariffs, and the largest purchase commitments were to be carried by state enterprises and firms close to the government (Laksono, 2025). The business class that might have objected is loyal to Prabowo. And the deal was framed, with some justification, as the thing that saved an industrial base already shedding jobs, with the textile sector alone having lost hundreds of thousands of positions before the tariff arrived (Jani, 2025). Set against that, the critics, mostly

academics and commentators, had neither an organized bloc nor an opposition patron able to convert complaint into a threat to the government. The one large party outside Prabowo's coalition has its quarrels with him, but they do not run on the price of trade with America. The economic-nationalist sentiment is real but diffuse. It is one camp among the pro-liberalization and pro-ASEAN groups that have long contended over Indonesian trade policy (Syarip, 2020), and diffuse sentiment is not a cleavage.

The counterfactual sharpens the point. Had the same demand fallen on the Indonesia of the early 2000s, a young democracy with thin coalitions, contested rules, and Islamic and nationalist blocs with their own patrons, a deal this lopsided would have been far harder to carry, because a rival would have had both the freedom and the constituency to make the president pay for it. The variable that changed is not the tariff but the regime: a leader who controls the field, and whom the demand hands no organized cleavage, can take an unpopular bargain and supply the reading under which it is judged. The concession was not small. It simply was not going to cost him.

Vietnam: The Closed System, and Why Closure Is Not the Whole Story

Vietnam had it worse on paper. The forty-six percent announced on April 2 was, for an economy whose exports run near the size of its whole output and whose single largest market is the United States, close to ruinous; shipments to America had climbed to roughly a hundred and thirty-seven billion dollars in 2024, nearly treble a few years earlier (Breuninger, 2025). It settled early all the same. On July 2, after a call between Trump and To Lam, the general secretary of the Communist Party, Vietnam accepted twenty percent, with forty percent on goods merely routed through the country to disguise a Chinese origin, and opened its market to American products at zero (Breuninger, 2025).

It would be too quick to say that an authoritarian regime is simply free of domestic constraint, and the objection is well taken. Authoritarian leaders do answer to audiences, can incur something like audience costs, and in export-dependent states are acutely sensitive to the economic performance on which their legitimacy rests (Weeks, 2008; Li & Chen, 2021; Weiss, 2014).

Even so, the domestic political costs of external economic pressure are hardest to impose precisely on autocratic targets, where such pressure tends to dampen rather than provoke anti-government mobilization (Allen, 2008). Vietnam's politics is not empty of rivalry; it runs as factional competition inside the party, between camps and patronage networks, and a general secretary who mishandled a shock of this size could be weakened within that arena. So the question is not whether Vietnam's leadership faced any constraint but whether the constraint took the form the mechanism cares about, a rival able to mobilize a cleavage against a concession.

It did not, and the reason is the structure of the rivalry rather than its absence. Factional competition inside a Leninist party is fought over performance, patronage, and succession, not by rallying a public against a foreign deal, because there is no electorate to rally and no opposition outside the party permitted to try. A general secretary who delivers continued access to the American market strengthens his hand in that contest rather than weakening it; the deal was an achievement to be claimed, not a surrender to be punished. Whatever cleavages run through Vietnamese society, the party holds both the will and the apparatus to keep them off the street. Here too the counterfactual helps: were Vietnam an open and divided polity with the same exposure, a forty-six percent threat that forced a humiliating capitulation would have been ready-made ammunition for a rival, and the leadership would have had to weigh defiance more seriously. Closure does not make the concession costless in some absolute sense. It removes the channel through which the cost would otherwise be exacted.

Brazil: The Demand That Struck the Cleavage

Brazil refused, and it teaches the most, because here the mechanism produces defiance rather than surrender. The fifty percent tariff arrived in July, set to bite on August 1, and it did not look like the others (Savarese & Boak, 2025). The standard letters cited a trade deficit; this one could not, because the United States runs a surplus with Brazil. So it reached instead for Brazil's prosecution of Jair Bolsonaro, the former president then on trial for plotting to overturn the election he had lost, which Trump called a witch

hunt and ordered stopped (Savarese & Boak, 2025). That dropped the demand onto the rawest organized cleavage in Brazilian politics, the divide between Bolsonaro's movement and Lula's, and the partisan errand was barely disguised: Bolsonaro's son Eduardo had moved to the United States and spent months lobbying the administration, and claimed credit when the pressure landed (Guimarães, 2025).

Lula refused flatly and in public. Brazil was sovereign, its courts were its own affair, it would accept no tutelage, and any tariff would be matched (Savarese & Boak, 2025). The refusal cost something real: the currency slid and exporters from planemakers to coffee and beef producers braced for losses.

It was still the survival-maximizing choice, because the demand had struck the cleavage. To comply would have meant leaning on his own courts to spare the rival he had beaten, confirming the exact charge his enemies press, that he bends to outsiders. To refuse let him stand as the defender of national sovereignty against a foreign power reaching into a domestic trial, and the constituency he rallied was national, not factional.

The causation here deserves caution, because the approval data alone cannot carry the full causal weight, and the claim should be stated as what it is. Lula's standing did rise across the period of the threats, crossing fifty percent for the first time since late 2024, and a majority came to see him rather than Bolsonaro as the better representative of Brazil abroad (Guimarães, 2025). That movement is consistent with the rally-around-the-flag effect long noted when a foreign power pressures a state, which can harden a target's cohesion behind its leader rather than break it (Galtung, 1967; Mueller, 1973). But rival explanations cannot be excluded with the evidence at hand: an easing of inflation, the ordinary recovery of a first-term slump, and a broader regional reaction against the Trump administration could each have lifted the numbers. What the case can establish, short of a clean isolation of the effect, is the narrower and still telling claim, that defiance carried a domestic logic rather than a cost, that Lula chose it openly and staked himself on it, and that the demand was constructed so that

compliance would have handed his rival a victory. The approval data are corroborating, not load-bearing; the load is carried by the structure of the choice.

The pressure also failed on its own terms. Bolsonaro was convicted in September and given a long sentence, the opposite of what the tariff was meant to buy, and the affair pushed Brazil to lean harder into China and into the BRICS summit it hosted that year (Winter, 2025). By late in the year Washington had begun quietly exempting some Brazilian goods. When a demand lights up the cleavage a rival stands on, the leader keeps himself safe by refusing it. Lula refused.

Reading the Three

Lined up, the three make a pattern a capabilities account misses. Each was far weaker than the United States, each leaned on the American market, each got essentially the same letter, and yet the responses ran from quick surrender to rewarded defiance. Vietnam folded because no one inside could make it pay. Indonesia folded because its leader was secure and the demand reached no organized cleavage. Brazil fought because the demand was built to strike its deepest division, which made refusal safe and compliance dangerous. Hold power roughly constant, vary regime strength and cleavage, and the outcomes fall where the argument says they should.

The strongest single piece of leverage is the Brazil counterfactual, because it isolates the cleavage variable while holding the rest fixed. Had the American letter cited only the trade balance, as the others did, it would have touched no organized cleavage, and a re-elected Lula with a working majority would have had room to bargain much as Prabowo did. It was the choice to pin the tariff to Bolsonaro's trial, not the size of the tariff, that flipped the case. The same demand, stripped of its partisan target, would most likely have produced a deal.

Two caveats keep the comparison honest. The argument is about the leader's choice, not his fate: it predicts the response that guards his standing, not that the response always succeeds. And three cases selected for legibility

are a probe, not a verdict; they make the mechanism plausible and the power-only reading look thin, and they earn the cost of a larger test, which is a different undertaking.

CONCLUSION

The argument carries a lesson for how coercion is studied and one for how it is practiced. For the study, the domestic turn should go a step further. It is not enough to gauge how vulnerable a target is in the aggregate; the question is who would profit from the leader's discomfort, which means asking whether the demand reaches a cleavage a rival can work, and whether the regime lets that rival move. Read only the balance of power, or even the general mood of the public, and the cases where one state caves, a second caves without a murmur, and a third refuses and gains will all look like noise.

The methodological contribution is matched to the method. A plausibility probe cannot show how often the mechanism governs; it can show that it governs somewhere, specify the two variables that drive it, and hand a successor study a clear job. That job has a concrete shape. It would code a population of compellent demands, the recent tariff campaign offers dozens in a single season, for regime strength and for whether each demand activated an organized cleavage, and test whether compliance falls as the argument predicts. It would trace the within-case process more finely than public sources allow here, through parliamentary records, elite interviews, and party archives, to watch a rival actually pick up a concession and wield it. And it would press the scope conditions against harder cases, especially ones where survival pressures and domestic competition pull in opposite directions. Until that work is done, the generalization should be held modestly: the claim is that domestic competition can decide compellence outcomes under the stated conditions, not that it always does.

For practice, the implication is blunt. Tie a demand to a target's internal fights, as the 2025 measure tied a tariff to a criminal trial, and a great power may arm the leader it meant to squeeze, because it has lit the cleavage its rival depends on and made defiance pay. Coercion that wades into someone else's domestic quarrel tends to be swallowed by that quarrel and turned

against whoever it most plainly threatens. Whether a weak state does what a strong one wants is settled less in Washington than in the domestic contest of the state being pushed. The pressure comes from outside; what decides its fate is the fight at home it stumbles into, which the great power can neither see well nor steer.

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