

# The elusive stick of power

BY VINCENZO CAMPORINI

Vice President of IAI  
and former Chief of Italian Defense Staff



Balancing threats with incentives is an age-old political skill. As societies become more complex and technologically advanced, there is a greater probability that our “carrots” and “sticks” will not work as intended with less developed adversaries.

The nature of power is elusive, today more than ever, and has gone through changes throughout the history of mankind.

Purely as a result of violence and the threat of violence, the effectiveness of consensus has gradually taken the upper hand. Consensus has often been obtained through a combination of the stick and carrot: the threat of using force and the concession or the promise of concession leading to future benefits. Religions also use this mechanism: “believe what I tell you, behave accordingly, and you’ll be rewarded in heaven; otherwise hell is waiting for you.”

Progress in literacy and education, in parallel with the progressive availability of new and more effective media, from Gutenberg on, had contrasting effects. On the one hand, those who mastered media could address larger and larger masses and drive their feelings with unprecedented effectiveness. On the other hand, it has become more and more difficult to convince people, because they have more instruments with which to understand, so democracy has been strengthened in its path.

Similar patterns and mechanisms can be observed between nations. Sticks and carrots have always been used, even in the Roman Empire, the stick being the legions of the Roman army and the carrot being the concessions of Roman citizenship with its consequent privileges. In this line, consider the “soft power” credited to the European Union: the prize of enlargement being based on substantial conditions and conditionality being the name of the game also for bilateral economic and commercial agreements with other countries. And what about the stick? Unfortunately the effectiveness of the stick in the last couple of decades has diminished substantially.

The evolutions sketched out above do not proceed in parallel throughout the globe and have been faster in some areas than in others. Moreover, they have taken different shades in different civilizations. It is not that some cultures are better than others; rather, there are differences, and these differences are the roots of asymmetry in international relations. In the areas

shaped by the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian tradition, under the thrust of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the individual has become central; everything is related to the individual, which has become the main value. Elsewhere, the community has not lost its appeal on the individual, whose identity still adheres to family, clan, religious affiliation, and nation. This difference, which we observe with different shades and depth, makes the relation between communities belonging to the first type and those belonging to the second substantially asymmetric, since what is greatly desired on one side is less appealing on the other, and what is strongly feared on one side is less dreadful for the other. This accounts for why the concept of deterrence in military strategy has apparently lost its validity, the validity that granted Europe the longest period of peace during the Cold War. But only apparently.

In order for the carrot-and-stick method to work, the carrot must be palatable and the stick must be something the counterpart is afraid of. Also, it is absolutely crucial that the counterparts are playing the same game, with their own instruments of power. If the instruments on both sides are not equal, then there may be a misunderstanding with respect to the rules of the game and in the end, no matter how powerful and efficient our military tools are, no matter how strong our economy is, we may find ourselves if not on the losing side, then not on the side of the winner. And in politics, a tie may not always be desirable and even appear as a defeat.

Thus the validity of deterrence in the Cold War era was only apparent. You can deter someone only if the threat you are posing is something your counterpart is afraid of. A terrorist is not afraid of nuclear retaliation because it is not credible, he is not afraid to lose his life and we have the examples of thousands of kamikazes, ready to lose their lives in their endeavors. Therefore, if we want deterrence to regain its validity, other ways of threatening must be found. For sure you cannot deter a kamikaze the same way you cannot deter a bullet after it has left the gun. The element that must be

A political cartoon from an American news magazine in 1905. The image references Theodore Roosevelt's

famous phrase: "Speak softly and carry a big stick," which became the driving principle of his foreign policy.



deterred is the individual who holds the gun and who pulls the trigger, the one who trained the kamikaze and convinced him. And you must enter his own mentality to understand what he is afraid of.

No man or woman is immune to fear. This idea comes across admirably in the final chapter of *1984* by George Orwell. In this new global world, not only must our nations maintain sufficient conventional and modern military capabilities, but we also have to enter the realm of psychology, anthropology and sociology if we want to be ready, keeping sufficient and effective leverage to drive the path of history.

We also have to take into account the wide set of rules, or "humanitarian legislation," that our democratic societies have progressively created and enforced to make an open conflict less inhumane. There was the creation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the Red Cross. Later there were the Geneva Conventions and the successful campaigns to ban certain types of weapons, such as the chemical weapons, antipersonnel mines and cluster bombs. These developments have created another level of asymmetry,

because not all countries have subscribed to these rules, which creates an objective advantage for those who feel totally free to use banned weapons. This asymmetry plays an important role in the final equation of power, not only for the practical effects during operations in the battlefields, but also for the psychology on both sides: the ones who fight according to these rules and those who are not bound to do so. This is true at a tactical level as well as at the political one.

From all these considerations an interesting conclusion can be drawn: power, particular military power, is a *state of mind*. Not that hardware, structures and systems are irrelevant; on the contrary, they are absolutely necessary and it is necessary that they be maintained, upgraded and modernized to keep up and possibly widen the technology gap. But all this is not sufficient if at any level, from the tactical one in the battlefield, up to the highest political decision makers, there is a lack of willingness and determination. You cannot exercise power if you lack the resolution to use your instruments, no matter how modern and

efficient these are. Even more important, you cannot exercise power if your opponent believes you lack the determination to do so, and/or if the final effect is something he does not care about.

Similar considerations can be made for the carrot: no matter what we consider to be desirable, in terms of democracy or rule of law, as well as in terms of availability of goods and technology in our homes, we have to consider that other cultures and communities may have different desires. Therefore, before offering or promising benefits we must be sure that our offer is palatable to our counterpart and, more than that, we must be consistent and credible, otherwise the effectiveness of our policies will be less than nil, they may even be counterproductive.

So to make our power effective, we must include along with the hardware, which we already have, the software, which is composed of the determination to use it, the understanding of the counterpart, and the definition of the objective. Otherwise all our quality hardware risks being useless.