



The Credibility Trap

Why does a long-debunked theory keep leading the US into war?

Max Fisher

April 29, 2016

If you have experienced even a few minutes of cable news coverage or handful of newspaper op-eds on American foreign policy, there is a word you will have encountered over and over again: credibility.

The United States, according to this theory, has to follow through on every threat and confront every adversary in order to maintain America's global credibility. If it fails to stand up to challengers in one place, then they will rise up everywhere, and America will see its global standing, and thus its power in the world, crumble.

This argument has dominated Washington especially in the three years since President Barack Obama declined to bomb Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad as punishment for using chemical weapons. Proponents of "credibility" say this matters for more than just Syria.

American allies came to distrust and drift away from US leadership, they argued. And American adversaries grew emboldened — including Russia's Vladimir Putin, whose subsequent invasion of Ukraine was said to be a direct result of weakened American credibility.

"Putin believes Obama does not have the intestinal fortitude to stand up to him in Ukraine. He thinks Obama will talk tough and then look for a way out — just like he did with Assad," wrote Washington Post columnist [Marc Thiessen](#).

"Syria has become the graveyard of U.S. credibility," columnist Michael Gerson [wrote](#) in the same paper.

This theory is not exclusive to overheated op-eds. It is pervasive, almost to the point of consensus, in much of Washington's foreign policy community, including among many policy-makers — and has been that way longer than perhaps even proponents realize.

In 1950, as the United States considered whether or not to intervene in the Korean War, a CIA report urged the US to intervene so as to uphold its credibility far away in Europe:

A failure to draw the line would have seriously discredited the whole US policy of containment, gravely handicapping US efforts to maintain alliances and build political influence with the Western European powers and with other nations closely aligned with the US.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson agreed, fearing that European leaders would be in a "near-panic, as they watched to see whether the United States would act." If the US did not invade Korea, Acheson worried, Europe's frail post-war order could be at risk.

And this is not just an American belief. As former National Security Council official Philip Gordon recounted recently, France kept fighting in Algeria, long after the costly war appeared lost, partly out of fear of losing credibility.

"The credibility issue—if you pull out of Algeria, boy, you lose face, right? And so the argument was, stay in and keep a lid on it," Gordon told the Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg.

But there is a problem with this theory of credibility: It does not appear to be real. Political scientists have investigated this theory over and over, and have repeatedly disproven it.

Yet the belief in credibility persists, dominating America's foreign policy debate, steering the United States toward military action abroad in pursuit of a strategic asset — the credibility of America's reputation — that turns out not to exist.

How did this idea become so entrenched in Washington, and why does it persist despite being repeatedly debunked? What does it mean to have so many of America's foreign policy discussions turn around an idea that is demonstrably false — and what can this tell us about how and why America intervenes abroad?

The credibility myth

When Americans talk about "credibility" in foreign policy, what they are usually describing is something that political scientists instead call *reputational* or *reputation-based* credibility.

In political science, "credibility" usually refers to specific promises or threats, and in this case the research does say that credibility is real. For example, if the US pledges to defend South Korea from a North Korean invasion, then it matters that the US convince both Koreas that this pledge is credible, for example by stationing US troops in South Korea.

That is the formal definition of credibility in foreign policy, it's real, and it matters. But when "credibility" is used colloquially, it typically refers to a very different kind of credibility, one based entirely in a country's or leader's reputation from its actions *in other* disputes or conflicts. (This article uses the colloquial definition of credibility, except where noted otherwise.)

Under this line of thinking, if the US fails to follow through on a threat or stand up to a challenger in one part of the world, then its allies and enemies globally will be more likely to

conclude that all American threats are empty, and that America can be pushed around. If the US backed down once, it will back down again.

It's easy to see how people could be attracted to this idea, which puts complicated geo-politics in simple and familiar human terms. It encourages us to think of states as just like people.

But states are not people, and this theory, for all its appealing simplicity, is not correct. There is no evidence that America's allies or enemies change their behavior based on conclusions about America's reputation for credibility, or that such a form of reputation even exists in foreign policy.

"Do leaders assume that other leaders who have been irresolute in the past will be irresolute in the future and that, therefore, their threats are not credible?" the University of Washington's Jonathan Mercer wrote, in introducing his research on this question.

"No; broad and deep evidence dispels that notion," Mercer concluded. "As the record shows, reputations do not matter."

A 1984 Yale University study, for example, examined dozens of cases from 1900 to 1980 to look for signs that, if a country stood down in one confrontation, it would face more challengers elsewhere. The answer was no: "deterrence success is not systematically associated ... with the defender's firmness or lack of it in previous crises."

Historians have also looked at specific incidents where the US thought its credibility was on the line and determined that we were simply mistaken.

Acheson's warning that the US had to invade Korea to reassure its European allies, for example, turned out to be wrong: British and French officials in fact worried the Americans were going to pull them into a far-away war.

During the Vietnam War, American officials could see that they were losing, but for years worried that withdrawing would communicate weakness to the Soviet Union, emboldening Moscow to test American commitments elsewhere. Even if Vietnam was lost, American credibility had to be defended.

As historian Ted Hopf has shown, the Americans could not have had it more wrong: Soviet leaders never reached any such conclusion, and in fact were puzzled as to why the US sacrificed so many lives for a war that was clearly lost.

If that's not enough evidence for you, try considering reputational credibility from the opposite point of view, and it starts to look more obviously ridiculous. Dartmouth's Daryl Press once pointed out to my colleague Dylan Matthews that Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev repeatedly threatened to eject the American-led forces occupying West Berlin, but he backed down. The US didn't consider him one iota less "credible" for this, and during the following year's Cuban Missile Crisis took his threats very seriously.

The idea of reputational credibility has also been debunked in the most well-known recent case: the notion that America's failure to bomb Syria in 2013 emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Proponents of reputational credibility took Putin's 2014 Ukraine invasions as vindication. Surely Putin only invaded because America had damaged its credibility in Syria, they argued. In their view, it showed why it is so crucial for the US to maintain its reputational credibility by never backing down from military interventions.

Julia Ioffe recently [investigated this theory](#) for the Atlantic, asking foreign policy officials and experts in Moscow whether there was merit to it. She seemed to reach the same conclusion as have many Russia analysts: that Putin invaded Ukraine for reasons specific to Ukraine. America's supposed reputation loss in Syria appeared to play no role. Some of Ioffe's sources seemed to not even understand the argument of how Syria and Ukraine would connect.

The credibility trap

You will notice something these incidents have in common. In every case, a belief in "credibility" pulls the United States toward fighting a war for the wrong reasons, or toward staying in a war longer than is worthwhile.

This mistaken belief has repeatedly helped to drive American military action abroad, Dartmouth's Jennifer Lind demonstrates [in a new article](#) in International Security Studies Forum.

"Indeed, from Korea, to Vietnam, to Bosnia, to Libya, to President Barack Obama's 'red line' in Syria, debates about U.S. intervention are thick with admonitions that 'Our Credibility Is On The Line,'" Lind writes.

The logic of reputational credibility can only ever lead to the same conclusion: toward the use of American military force abroad, even in cases where there is no clear reason to intervene and where the downsides of intervention would seem to outweigh the upsides. It is a compass that only points in one direction.

In this theory, the use of force is inherently good, regardless of how or where the bombs fall, because it strengthens American leadership globally. And an absence of American military action is almost always bad, because it is said to invite new problems and greater threats.

"Every time analysts and leaders call for war, they warn that inaction will jeopardize America's credibility," Lind and Press, her husband, have previously written in [Foreign Policy](#).

Alarming, despite the mounting evidence against reputation theory, it continues to drive US foreign policy discourse — and has recently even been integrated into the formal legal basis of American foreign policy.

"Credibility has migrated from foreign policy into the constitutional law of war powers," Vanderbilt's Ganesh Sitaraman found in a 2014 [Harvard Law Review](#) article:

In a series of opinions, including on Somalia (1992), Haiti (2004), and Libya (2011), the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) has argued that the credibility of the United Nations Security Council is a "national interest" • that can justify presidential authority to use military force without prior congressional authorization.

The 2011 case is particularly striking, given that it occurred under President Obama, who has personally denounced reputational credibility as "so easily disposed of that I'm always puzzled by how people make the argument."

Yet reputation theory is so prevalent in American thinking that even a president who specifically opposes that theory — and is himself a constitutional lawyer — has allowed it to be formally integrating into his government's legal case for war.

Are America's allies to blame? Or are we?

If reputational credibility has been so repeatedly debunked, both in specific instances and as a theory, why does it continue to loom so large in America's foreign policy discourse?

Tufts University's Michael Beckley hinted at one possible explanation in a much-discussed article last year in *International Security*: Could it have something to do with America's uniquely broad network of alliances?

Beckley's article was actually asking a different question — whether those alliances lead the US to war, by allowing allies to "entangle" it in foreign conflict. (Beckley concludes the answer is no; other scholars have disputed his findings.)

But, in reviewing so-called "entanglement theory," Beckley points out that reputational credibility, even if it doesn't exist in the world, is something that *definitely* exists in the minds of foreign leaders and foreign policy decision-makers.

"The alliance comes to be perceived as an end in itself, transcending the more concrete national security interests for which it was initially conceived," political scientist Jack Levy wrote in a well-known 1981 paper (which Beckley cites). Here's the key quote:

Political decision makers come to believe that support for one's allies, regardless of its consequences, is essential for their national prestige, and that the failure to provide support would ultimately result in their diplomatic isolation in a hostile and threatening world.

So it's not that reputation is a real thing that compels states to act in a certain way, but rather that individual decision-makers are driven by their own mistaken belief in reputation. As a result, Beckley writes, "reputational concerns can drive states into wars over trivial interests in peripheral places."

Some scholars, including Levy, argue that America's allies promote the idea of reputation, as a means to convince the United States to commit more resources to serve their own interests.

Foreign leaders do seem to become awfully preoccupied with American credibility when they want the US to take military action on their behalf. When the US failed to bomb Syria in 2013,

for example, Syria's enemies in the region — Arab leaders who are also allied with the US — declared that American credibility was at stake.

"I think I believe in American power more than Obama does," Jordan's King Abdullah II said of Obama's decision to not bomb Syria.

This comes at a time when the US has grown unusually indulgent of its allies, as Jeremy Shapiro and Richard Sokolsky argue in a recent article. This has made American policymakers more likely to heed allies' demands and take their claims at face value.

But Dartmouth's Jennifer Lind finds evidence that allies make this argument only opportunistically, and almost always about conflicts in which they are directly involved. They might speak in the language of reputation theory, but their behavior suggests that they do not really believe in it.

Reputation theory, after all, says that America's allies would want the US to intervene as much as possible in *other* conflicts, when in fact the opposite is usually true.

In fact, so-called reputation is actually driven almost entirely by internal American dynamics. Consider America's belief that it had to intervene in Korea to reassure European allies, who in fact wanted no such thing.

Lind makes this point well by citing America's pledge to defend Taiwan from a possible Chinese invasion. According to reputation theory, Asian leaders who also fear Chinese aggression would want the US to make and uphold this pledge. American policymakers indeed believe this, and it is one reason (albeit far from the only reason) why the US has pledged to fight in such a war.

"Many U.S. leaders and foreign policy elites today argue that, in the event of a war in the Taiwan strait, the United States must defend Taiwan or see its credibility collapse," Lind writes.

In reality, the opposite is true. American allies in Asia, Lind writes, "make it clear that they under no circumstances want war in the Taiwan strait, and fear that the Americans will someday fight one with China."

The Taiwan example is instructive, if alarming: America's foreign policy community believes something that is flatly untrue. And while a Sino-American war over Taiwan is extremely unlikely, it looked substantially *less* unlikely in the 1990s. It is concerning that American policymakers were committing the US to fight such a war in part because they believed something that was 180-degrees the opposite of reality.

The point is not just that America's mistaken belief in credibility is dangerous, but also that it does not come from allies. It comes from us.

Credibility mythology: America's go-to case for war

So what is really going on? Why are America's foreign policy leaders and thinker so set on believing something that has been repeatedly demonstrated as untrue?

Political scientists prefer to answer questions that are falsifiable — is credibility real? — than to pathologize policymakers who choose to believe and act upon a wrong theory.

But people who've researched this theory suggest it has two likely draws. First, it is a reliable and effective argument for publicly selling military action. And, second, the notion of "credibility" tells a story that can be very appealing to American foreign policy elites, leading them to *want* to believe something they should know to question.

It's easy to overstate the degree to which this phenomenon is driven by the first of those two factors, the idea that credibility theory can be politically useful for selling military action. But it really can be.

Because the logic of reputation-based credibility *always* points toward taking military action, and because unlike most foreign policy precepts it is very intuitive and easy to understand, foreign policy elites who want some sort of military action have a strong incentive to make that argument.

"The credibility argument is simply an easy (and hard to disprove) way for elites to sell the foreign policy they're most interested in to the American people, whether that's domino theory, primacy, or intervention in some conflict," Emma Ashford of the Cato Institute pointed out.

"Credibility is an intuitive and hard to refute argument, even if larger studies show it to be false," she added.

Policymakers or foreign leaders who might have several reasons to seek some specific military action, even if some of those reasons are good, will be inclined to emphasize "credibility" arguments because they are easier to sell.

As a result, every time there is a debate over possible military action, the airwaves fill with warnings about American credibility.

Studies have shown that many Americans still believe that Obamacare includes "death panels," despite that myth being both frequently refuted and on-its-face ridiculous. Imagine how pervasive that myth would be if its wrongness were less obvious, if both Democrats and Republicans repeated it, as they do with credibility, and if rebuttals appeared only in obscure political science journals. It would be everywhere.

America's foreign policy debate, after all, doesn't exactly play out in the pages of *International Security Studies*. It plays out in mass-market media: on cable news and in newspaper op-ed pages, mediums that privilege short, simple, intuitive arguments.

What could be simpler and more intuitive than telling people that countries are just like people, that we have to stand up to this bully or we'll get our lunch money taken again?

Credibility mythology: the stories we tell ourselves about American power

But this does not explain why so many policymakers seem to earnestly believe the theory. And they really do. You hear it repeated on think tank panels, at off-the-record roundtables, even in informal conversations with policymakers.

The idea of American credibility, I have noticed, can evoke something like an emotional reaction in many Washington foreign policy figures. It can seem to be a core belief, less in the manner of a political science axiom, and more in the way that, say, being "pro-Israel" is a core belief, or that America's responsibility to uphold human rights abroad is a core belief.

American foreign policy is ultimately made by human beings, not by emotionless automatons. And like any other industry, the people who work in it tend to privilege a worldview in which their work is important and positive. But that can mean seeing American foreign policy itself as important and positive, maybe more so than it always is.

We understand intuitively how this happens in other industries: why a technology executive would overstate the world-changing power of smartphone apps, or would personalize Silicon Valley as an extension of their personal values. It should not be shocking that American foreign policy professionals — a relatively small and insular community — would indulge this very human habit as well.

And that gets to the second, and perhaps core, driver of this mistaken belief: reputational credibility asserts a vision of the world and America that can be very appealing, on both professional and personal terms, to American foreign policy professionals.

It portrays the world as a place where the world turns on American power, whose assertion is *inherently* a force for justice and stability.

It's a world where the United States is the protagonist of every story — because every conflict is a test of our credibility, we are at the center even of events that seem to have nothing to do with us — and where the US is best served by personifying the characteristics of a Hollywood action movie hero.

The world's default state, in this telling, is peaceful American hegemony, where every foreign leader is restrained from any bad action anywhere by their belief in American-enforced justice. If problems arise, it is only because the world has drifted from this default, which can be restored by reasserting American credibility.

American foreign policy professionals, in this view, can feel uncomplicated pride and certainty about America's — and thus their own — role in the world.

The military historian Andrew Bacevich has observed these sorts of mythical and self-actualizing beliefs in American power in the United States' repeated interventions in the Middle East, he writes in a new book.

American policymakers often decided to launch these wars, he found, based on "destructive myths about the efficacy of American military power" and "a presumption that using military power signified to friends and foes that Washington was getting serious about a problem," the journalist David Rohde writes in a review.

Robert Farley, a University of Kentucky scholar who writes frequently on this issue, offered a version of this theory that looks different only on first glance.

"I actually sat down last night with Jon Mercer (one of the bigger voices in the anti-reputation set), and we struggled to figure this one out," Farley told me in an email. (His is the same Mercer quoted elsewhere in this article.)

"The normal answers — Munich analogy, Cold War rational deterrence thought, American political culture — don't really serve as very useful explanations," he said, because there is evidence that European states prior to World War I also acted on misguided notions of reputation-based credibility.

"If I had to, I'd probably say that it's gendered," he suggested, which sounded silly to me until I considered his argument.

"The toughness fascination emerges from a variety of gender tropes that extend back pretty far that associate toughness with manliness," he wrote. "This understanding manifests in diplomacy through the obsession with reputation. Combine that with the regular diplomatic over-emphasis on the effect of US action, and you get a compulsion to look at every event in terms of whose dick is longer."

While gendered norms do not necessarily have to play out along black-and-white gender lines, it is hard to ignore that American foreign policy is notoriously male-dominated. Proponents of reputation theory tend to speak in explicitly male metaphors — playground brawls, barroom fights, sports matches — whereas critics of reputation are often women. That seems striking.

I admit I am most persuaded, though, by Bacevich's suggestion that American foreign policy professionals, regardless of gender, have been drawn to myths of American credibility that allow them to see their work, and to some extent themselves, in a more flattering and uncomplicated light.

You can see evidence of these myths when you look at the nature of the gap between reality and perception on credibility.

The reality, we know from the research, is that American action in one place, let's say Syria, does not have any reputation-based implications for other places, such as Ukraine. Nor is it the case that other countries, such as Russia, change their behavior based on their perception of America's reputation.

But the perception is that America is so uniquely important that allies and adversaries alike make important decisions based less on their national interests and more on simply how they feel about America and the American president.

While this might look like we are putting allies' interests before our own, in fact we are asserting a vision of ourselves in which *we* are more important to those countries — and to the world — than we actually are.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not about Ukrainian factors or Russian interests, in our view, but rather it is a story about America failing to live up to its ideals in the world.

Rather than admit that some things are beyond our control, reputation theory allows us to believe that we can prevent bad things from happening in the world simply by being truer to ourselves. It is an appealing message. Unfortunately, the world simply doesn't work that way.