



On the World Stage, Washington Should Learn When to Keep Quiet

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North Korea appears headed for a fifth nuclear test. The U.S. joined South Korea and Japan in warning Pyongyang against violating its international obligations, just as the three governments have done for the last quarter century.

Alas, they cannot stop the North from moving forward with its nuclear program — at least not at reasonable cost. Washington should learn the value of saying nothing.

Rather than highlight its impotence, Washington should demonstrate humility and prudence, virtues too often missing in U.S. foreign policy.

The U.S. stands apart from the rest of the world. American officials circle the globe lecturing other nations. Yet other governments rarely heed Washington. It doesn't matter whether they are friends or foes. Other states act in their, not America's, interest.

In such a world, what issues warrant bribery or coercion to persuade recalcitrant foreign governments to comply? A threat to go to war should be restricted to matters which are truly vital and worth the sacrifice of American lives. Even lesser measures, such as sanctions, should be limited to advancing important U.S. interests. Washington should eschew nation building and global social engineering.

In most cases, the U.S. should shut up and work behind the scenes to achieve its goals. Rather than highlight its impotence, Washington should demonstrate humility and prudence, virtues too often missing in U.S. foreign policy. When rebuffed, American officials should avoid whining.

Perhaps the most famous recent “red line” set by Washington was against Syria's apparent use of chemical weapons in the ongoing civil war. However, the president's off-handed comment promising action never made sense, since America would have gained nothing by going to war.

Syria's death toll has reached 400,000, the vast majority from bombs and bullets. Moreover, survival is the priority of every regime, especially one whose members face exile or death if their opponents triumph. Damascus always was likely to win a showdown with America.

Indeed, since 2011 the Obama administration has said that Syrian President Bashir al-Assad must go. But the administration has done little to force him out. So much for claims that failing to bomb Syria over chemical weapons uniquely undermined U.S. credibility.

Washington suffers the same problem when addressing its nominal friends and allies. For instance, Washington has long demanded that its allies spend and do more. Donald Trump has highlighted the issue.

But most states sheltering behind America continue to do what they always did: live off of the U.S. Washington responded by doing what it always did: whine while underwriting its nominal allies. America's complaints had no impact on its friends' behavior; for instance, many of NATO's European members refused to keep their repeated promises to spend more on defense even during the Cold War.

Japan used the so-called Peace Constitution imposed by its U.S. occupiers as a shield against Washington's requests that it take on more security responsibilities.

Now North Korea is in the news again. For a quarter century U.S. presidents — Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama — insisted that the North cannot, must not, dare not, develop nuclear weapons. The North proceeded to accumulate nuclear materials, test nuclear weapons, miniaturize warheads, and expand missile development. Which led Washington to ... insist, yet again, that Pyongyang comply with its demands: "We call on North Korea to refrain from actions that further destabilize the region and focus on what it needs to do."

No doubt, the world would be better off if the Democratic People's Republic of Korea abandoned its nuclear program. Unfortunately, the DPRK has a different view of "what it needs to do."

American officials should stop making demands that they are unwilling to enforce. An occasional bluff might pay dividends, but U.S. officials will retain credibility only if they exercise restraint and reserve threats for issues of serious interest to America.

After all, the U.S. was created by a few angry, determined colonists who took on the world's greatest power. It should not surprise their descendants that governments and peoples elsewhere are willing to similarly defy the world's current greatest power.

This is borne out in the case of Pyongyang as well, which seems determined to stage another nuclear test despite Washington's threats. There's not much the U.S. can do. But more blustering would be worse than doing nothing.

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