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The Incredible Crusade For Credibility

The Washington war machine insists every conflict is a measure of our credibility, every failure to advance an invitation to dictators.

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Some conflicts sell themselves. World War II, for instance. With opponents like Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, how could even a committed noninterventionist oppose joining the fight to save the world?

True, the allies tried cleaning up the image of mass murderer Joseph Stalin to advance their case. However, most everyone was committed to defeating Adolf Hitler.

Alas, World War II is the last truly “good war,” which Americans overwhelmingly believed to be necessary and right. The Korean War retained at least a little virtuous sheen, given the vile nature of the North Korean and Chinese systems. However, the South Korean government was authoritarian and murderous, the conflict’s stakes were questionable, and the U.S. public was war weary.

America’s conflicts since have been less popular and less justifiable. The foreign policy establishment remains determined to impose Washington’s will via force, if necessary, but is finding the task increasingly difficult. Iraq was a bloody, destabilizing disaster. Libya was a success only compared to Iraq. In Syria, the U.S. worked with the local affiliate of Al Qaeda, whose attack on 9/11 triggered the Global War on Terror. Yemen is a moral atrocity, backing authoritarian Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates in an aggressive war against the region’s poorest country. And Afghanistan became the endless, fruitless contest to plant democracy in Central Asia.

Unable to make a serious case for the most recent conflicts—that, for instance, they made America more secure—war advocates have desperately deployed alternative arguments, such as preserving U.S. credibility. If only President Barack Obama had expanded the Syrian war to the Assad government, the world would respect America. If only President Joe Biden had embraced another four years of the endless Afghan war, wannabe aggressors around the world would be cowering in their bathrooms, abandoning plans to conquer their neighbors.

Although this argument should be recognized as self-evidently nonsense, a cavalcade of supposedly serious people have embraced it. For instance, *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens, a war-on-every-continent sort of guy, wrote: “The current Ukraine crisis is as much the child of Biden’s Afghanistan debacle as the last Ukraine crisis was the child of Obama’s Syria debacle.” Former Pentagon official Michael G. Vickers insisted: “Our defeat in Afghanistan in August 2021 no doubt convinced Putin that our resolve to counter his aggression had weakened even more.”

The *Financial Times*’ Gideon Rachman went big, though he wrote before Russia acted, declaring that Washington’s credibility was “undermined” by the Afghan debacle, with terrible consequences: “If the U.S. will not commit to a fight against the Taliban, there will be a question mark over whether America would really be willing to go to war with China or Russia. Yet America’s global network of alliances is based on the idea that, in the last resort, U.S. troops would indeed be deployed to defend their allies in Asia, Europe and elsewhere.”

Nor is that all. “America’s precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan” signaled weakness to Putin, argued Fiona Hill, who served on Trump’s National Security Council. And Rep. Michael McFaul (R-Texas) contended that Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un “all view [the Afghan withdrawal] as a moment of weakness.” In particular, he contended, Putin was emboldened to act against Ukraine.

There were many more. Indeed, in August you couldn’t watch a news show or read political analysis about the Afghan pullout without being treated to yet another distressing description of America’s inevitable geopolitical collapse resulting from the catastrophic loss of credibility from the Afghan retreat as well as absolute certainty, advanced without a shred of evidence, that multiple foreign dictators were advancing their plans for world conquest as a result. The right response to this line of argument should have been a loud guffaw, followed by raucous laughter.

No doubt, the botched Afghan withdrawal implicated important issues regarding not just credibility, but also reputation and especially competence. The impact of these issues on policy is complicated and has evoked more than a little commentary. However, experience suggests that failed secondary campaigns in tertiary geographic areas of interest like Central Asia end up having little long-term impact.

After all, there was the dramatic collapse of Vietnam and Cambodia. The failed intervention in Angola. The North Korean capture of the USS *Pueblo*. The fall of U.S.-backed regimes in Cuba, Iran, and Nicaragua. The Soviet intervention in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The capture of the U.S. embassy and failed rescue raid in Iran. And the succession of foreign disasters varying in size and significance: Lebanon, Somalia, Haiti, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Capped by Afghanistan last August.

If lost credibility from policy failures mattered as much as is commonly claimed, how is the U.S. still the world’s dominant power? Why do so many defense dependents still crowd America’s security soup line? Observed Stephen Walt, “Maybe U.S. credibility is neither as fragile nor as essential as hard-liners think.” One suspects that friends and foes alike can distinguish between

important and peripheral interests and assess whether actions strengthen or weaken the U.S. Moreover, other nations act first on their interests and priorities.

For instance, imagine Vladimir Putin convening his national security team in September to discuss European policy. What would matter more to him—that the U.S. haphazardly left Afghanistan after 20 years, or that Russia possesses a nuclear force equal to America’s and local military superiority over Ukraine, which is not a NATO member? Would he not have felt even more comfortable acting if the U.S. remained committed to Afghanistan, ensuring a slow but steady drain of lives, money, and materiel in a theater Moscow had the good sense to abandon after only ten futile years?

Sticking with a losing, unimportant commitment forever might demonstrate resolve of sorts, but it also showcases poor judgment, awful priorities, and inadequate flexibility. If Putin was asked whether he would prefer the U.S. to focus on credibility and remain in Vietnam, Bosnia, Cambodia, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates forever, or hastily flee all of them, what would he say? Almost certainly he would prefer the first, which would leave the U.S. less ready and able for whatever plans he might have for Europe.

Similarly, regarding China: In considering whether to invade Taiwan, does it matter to Beijing whether the U.S. was willing to bomb the Assad government, which cannot resist, and forever occupy Afghanistan, which cannot oust American forces? These countries were peripheral interests for the U.S. They indicated nothing about Washington’s willingness to take on the People’s Republic of China over interests vital to the latter, such as Taiwan. The PRC has a large, sophisticated navy, sizeable and diverse missile arsenal, apparently growing nuclear deterrent, geographic advantage, and domestic support. By any measure, these are far more important to China’s decision making than U.S. attempts to maintain “credibility.”

Of course, what happens in Ukraine will become yet another part of the meme for U.S. credibility. If Russia takes military action, the caterwauling over lost credibility will begin again. In fact, Secretary of State Antony Blinken set the administration up for failure when he stated that “there is something even bigger at stake here, and it’s the basic rules of the road of the international system—rules that say that one country can’t change the borders of another by force.”

Others already are warning that Washington’s credibility is on the line. Observed Michael Crowley of the *New York Times*: “Another failure to deter Mr. Putin, Biden officials and their critics agree, would deal a severe blow to an international system of rules and borders that the administration has worked hard to reaffirm in the wake of President Donald J. Trump’s ‘America First’ foreign policy, which raised questions about how far the United States would go to defend its allies and enforce its vision of international rules.” Vickers argued that “The United States will lose even more if Xi Jinping takes a cue from Putin and invades Taiwan.”

Taking the idea of credibility to violent extremes was the largely forgotten Evelyn Farkas, from the Obama Department of Defense, who recently gained attention by advocating war with Russia now, rather than waiting for a justification. She even opposed a negotiated settlement, writing:

“Any appeasement will only beget future land grabs not only from Putin, but also from China in Taiwan and elsewhere.”

James R. Stavridis, a retired admiral and NATO supreme commander, was even more melodramatic: “Vladimir Putin has invaded two democratic neighbors in just over a decade. Letting him do it a third time would set the global system back decades.” He, too, saw an opportunity deploy the “A” word: “Appeasement does not work any better now than it worked for Neville Chamberlain in the late 1930s.” Appeasement that undermines credibility—what could be worse?!

Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, said Samuel Johnson. Credibility is the last resort of the hawkish scoundrel. If his or her preferred war has failed and the public wants out, the standard response is to warn about lost credibility. To leave [fill in the blank country] would encourage Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin, Ebrahim Raisi, Xi Jinping, or the next Adolf Hitler to launch their well-laid plan for world conquest! Only an isolationist, traitor, or fool would ignore such a threat. The only option is permanent intervention, war, and occupation.

In fact, the greatest harm to America’s credibility is constantly going to war for minimal stakes. Even a superpower can’t do everything. And it will be taken far more seriously by the rest of the world if it demonstrates that it knows when to act and when to stay out.

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