

The Duplicitous Superpower

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November 28, 2017

For any country, the foundation of successful diplomacy is a reputation for credibility and reliability. Governments are wary of concluding agreements with a negotiating partner that violates existing commitments and has a record of duplicity. Recent U.S. administrations have ignored that principle, and their actions have backfired majorly, damaging American foreign policy in the process.

The consequences of previous deceit are most evident in the ongoing effort to achieve a diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis. During his recent trip to East Asia, President Trump urged Kim Jong-un's regime to "come to the negotiating table" and "do the right thing"—relinquish the country's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Presumably, that concession would lead to a lifting (or at least an easing) of international economic sanctions and a more normal relationship between Pyongyang and the international community.

Unfortunately, North Korean leaders have abundant reasons to be wary of such U.S. enticements. Trump's transparent attempt to renege on Washington's commitment to the deal with Iran known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—which the United States and other major powers signed in 2015 to curb Tehran's nuclear program—certainly does not increase Pyongyang's incentive to sign a similar agreement. His decision to decertify Iran's compliance with the JCPOA, even when the United Nations confirms that Tehran is adhering to its obligations, appears more than a little disingenuous.

North Korea is likely focused on another incident that raises even greater doubts about U.S. credibility. Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi capitulated on the nuclear issue in December of 2003, abandoning his country's nuclear program and reiterating a commitment to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. In exchange, the United States and its allies lifted economic sanctions and welcomed Libya back into the community of respectable nations. Barely seven years later, though, Washington and its NATO partners double-crossed Qaddafi, launching airstrikes and cruise missile attacks to assist rebels in their campaign to overthrow the Libyan strongman. North Korea and other powers took notice of Qaddafi's fate, making the already difficult task of getting a de-nuclearization agreement with Pyongyang nearly impossible.

The Libya intervention sullied America's reputation in another way. Washington and its NATO allies prevailed on the UN Security Council to pass a resolution endorsing a military intervention to protect innocent civilians. Russia and China refrained from vetoing that resolution after Washington's assurances that military action would be limited in scope and solely for

humanitarian purposes. Once the assault began, it quickly became evident that the resolution was merely a fig leaf for another U.S.-led regime-change war.

Beijing, and especially Moscow, understandably felt duped. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates succinctly described Russia's reaction, both short-term and long-term:

The Russians later firmly believed they had been deceived on Libya. They had been persuaded to abstain at the UN on the grounds that the resolution provided for a humanitarian mission to prevent the slaughter of civilians. Yet as the list of bombing targets steadily grew, it became obvious that very few targets were off-limits, and that NATO was intent on getting rid of Qaddafi. Convinced they had been tricked, the Russians would subsequently block any such future resolutions, including against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

The Libya episode was hardly the first time the Russians concluded that U.S. leaders had cynically misled them. Moscow asserts that when East Germany unraveled in 1990, both U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and West German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher offered verbal assurances that, if Russia accepted a unified Germany within NATO, the alliance would not expand beyond Germany's eastern border. The official U.S. position that there was nothing in writing affirming such a limitation is correct—and the clarity, extent, and duration of any verbal commitment to refrain from enlargement are certainly matters of intense controversy. But invoking a “you didn't get it in writing” dodge does not inspire another government's trust.

There seems to be no limit to Washington's desire to crowd Russia. NATO has even added the Baltic republics, which had been part of the Soviet Union itself. In early 2008, President George W. Bush unsuccessfully tried to admit Georgia and Ukraine, which would have engineered yet another alliance move eastward. By that time, Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders were beyond furious.

The timing of Bush's attempted ploy could scarcely have been worse. It came on the heels of Russia's resentment at another example of U.S. duplicity. In 1999, Moscow had reluctantly accepted a UN mandate to cover NATO's military intervention against Serbia, a long-standing Russian client. The alliance airstrikes and subsequent moves to detach and occupy Serbia's restless province of Kosovo for the ostensible reason of protecting innocent civilians from atrocities was the same “humanitarian” justification that the West would use subsequently in Libya.

Nine years after the initial Kosovo intervention, the United States adopted an evasive policy move, showing utter contempt for Russia's wishes and interests in the process. Kosovo wanted to declare its formal independence from Serbia, but it was clear that such a move would face a certain Russian (and probable Chinese) veto in the UN Security Council. Washington and an ad-hoc coalition of European Union countries brazenly bypassed the Council and approved Pristina's independence declaration. It was an extremely controversial move. Not even all EU members were on board with the policy, since some of them (e.g., Spain) had secessionist problems of their own.

Russia's leaders protested vehemently and warned that the West's unauthorized action established a dangerous, destabilizing international precedent. Washington rebuffed their complaints, arguing that the Kosovo situation was unique. Under Secretary of State for Political

Affairs R. Nicholas Burns made that point explicitly in a February 2008 State Department briefing. Both the illogic and the hubris of that position were breathtaking.

It is painful for any American to admit that the United States has acquired a well-deserved reputation for duplicity in its foreign policy. But the evidence for that proposition is quite substantial. Indeed, disingenuous U.S. behavior regarding NATO expansion and the resolution of Kosovo's political status may be the single most important factor for the poisoned bilateral relationship with Moscow. The U.S. track record of duplicity and betrayal is one reason why prospects for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue through diplomacy are so bleak.

Actions have consequences, and Washington's reputation for disingenuous behavior has complicated America's own foreign policy objectives. This is a textbook example of a great power shooting itself in the foot.

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