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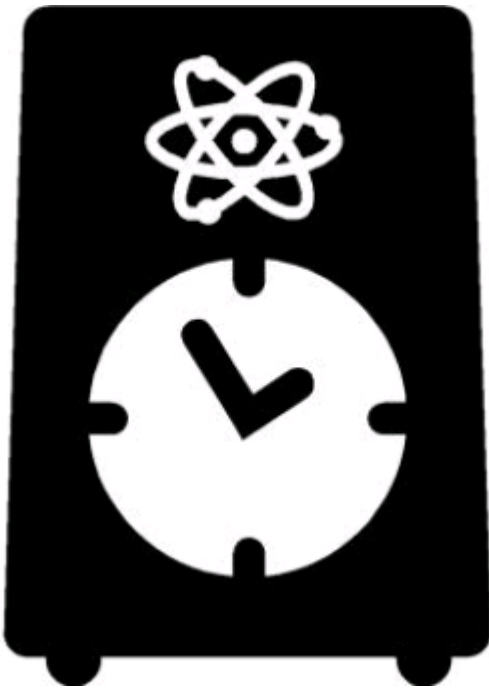
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## Dictators Learn Their Lessons

| [More](#)<sup>[1]</sup>

|  
March 25, 2011

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Two days ago I [observed](#)<sup>[3]</sup> that one of the consequences of forcing Muammar Qaddafi out of power, which is what the West is—sort of—trying to do now, is to kill any thoughts other authoritarian regimes would otherwise have of emulating Qaddafi in reaching agreements with the West on such matters as nuclear weapons or terrorism. The Libyan leader had made such a deal, giving up terrorism and his unconventional weapons programs in return for normal relations and acceptance in the community of nations. The West is now showing that, deal or no deal, it is going to seize a chance to get rid of Qaddafi's regime anyway. The clear lesson is that the West is not to be trusted, that whatever enticements it offers are meaningless, and that other regimes would be suckers to agree with the West on something like giving up a nuclear weapons program.

It has not taken long for at least one other dictatorship not only to draw that lesson but to speak about it publicly. The official North Korean news agency disseminated [comments this week from](#)

a foreign ministry official [4] who said Libya had been duped when it reached its agreement with the United States and Britain in 2003. The Western powers, he suggested, have been playing a big game of bait and switch. "The Libyan crisis is teaching the international community a grave lesson," the official said. He stated that North Korea will not make Qaddafi's mistake and instead is doing the right thing by holding on to every weapon it has.

The United States has been giving the North Koreans not only a single lesson but a whole course on what to do with its nuclear weapons program. The Iraq War, coupled with U.S. policy toward North Korea itself, taught the lesson that if you're thinking of getting involved with nuclear weapons, go full steam ahead so you can get at least one bomb in the basement as a deterrent before the United States or someone else uses military force to get rid of you. Now with the Libyan situation, the lesson is to cling to whatever nuclear weapons you have already managed to make. The rulers in Iran, being no dummies, are almost certainly drawing the same lessons. It will be very difficult, and will take much time and effort, to cause such lessons to be unlearned.

The unfortunate lessons are the sort of indirect effect that gets too little attention before major initiatives like the military intervention in Libya. It is not as if the possible impact on the perceptions of third parties is never considered, but the consideration gets narrowed to a single notion: that if the United States does not use force in the situation under discussion, its credibility will be damaged and other governments will not believe that it will not use force as necessary in other situations in which its vital interests may be at stake. As Benjamin Friedman points out [5], the historical record belies that notion. Governments do not gauge credibility that way because what the United States does when its vital interests are not at stake is a poor indicator of what it will do when they are. In contrast, the experience of Qaddafi's regime in dealing with the West is directly applicable to the predicaments of an Iran or North Korea.

None of this should surprise anyone who has studied his Thomas Schelling and the principles of deterrence and coercive diplomacy. Successful influence depends not only on the other party believing that we will execute a threat if he does not cooperate, but also on his believing that we will *not* execute the threat if he does cooperate. We would do well to learn that lesson, and to stop bankrupting our own diplomacy.

More by

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[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/paul-r-pillar>

[3] <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/the-terrorist-consequences-the-libyan-intervention-5064>

[4] [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/world/asia/25korea.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=North%20Korea%20Libya%20nuclear&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/world/asia/25korea.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=North%20Korea%20Libya%20nuclear&st=cse)

[5] <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/three-phoney-reasons-bomb-libya-5073?page=1>