



## **When Washington Sends a Message by Threatening War, Other Countries Hear ‘Build Nukes!’**

Doug Bandow

December 30, 2020

President Donald Trump, having launched brutal economic war against Iran while ordering the assassination of one of its top officials, appears shocked that Tehran keeps firing back, most recently at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. He remains full of threats, even though Secretary of State Mike Pompeo withdrew some embassy personnel and considered closing the facility. Despite his bluster, Trump has been a fake, a faux warrior and paper tiger, thankfully preferring so far to avoid military confrontation.

However, he recently initiated one of Washington’s patented but least effective maneuvers, having the US military sail and fly somewhere to "send a message" to an adversary. The purpose is to cow opponents into fearful submission, leaving them hunched in the fetal position, trembling in terror at the display of America’s awesome greatness. More likely, alas, dedicated nationalists abroad respond by building more, bigger, and deadlier weapons, including nuclear arms, to deter US military action.

Being a superpower is hard work. During the Cold War the US confronted the Soviet Union around the world. Since then Washington has attempted to impose its will unilaterally – "what we say goes," intoned President George H.W. Bush. However, other countries continue to stubbornly resist America’s will, causing every recent president to at least once intone "all options are on the table" when dealing with another government.

Roughly translated, that phrase means "we might choose to bomb the hell out of you because we feel like it, don’t like you, and believe we can do so with impunity, so you’d better do what we say." Washington regularly backs up its threats by sending bombers and aircraft carriers on visible patrols near recalcitrant states. US officials routinely explain that they are sending a "message." The presumption, obviously, is that obdurate governments, having been suitably intimidated, will immediately drop their resistance and obey America’s demands.

Alas, it never works out that way. True, Washington policymakers are legends in their own minds. But foreigners, whether in Cuba, Afghanistan, Yemen, China, Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, Vietnam, Russia, or elsewhere, turn out to be as tough and stubborn as Americans, including the colonists who some 250 years ago took on the globe’s premier colonial power –

and won. Yet the US learns nothing from painful experience, employing the same tactic again and again, irrespective of how often it fails.

The latest waste of Pentagon manpower and fuel occurred, unsurprisingly, under President Trump. Last week the administration sent the missile-carrying submarine through the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Lest you think it was a pleasure cruise, the *Washington Times* reported otherwise: "The US Navy on Monday sailed a nuclear-powered submarine through the Strait of Hormuz, sending an unmistakable message to Iran just a day after US officials blamed Iran-backed militias for a rocket attack on the American embassy complex in Iraq."

Unmistakable the transit might have been, but what was the message? That the USS Georgia would unleash its cruise missiles on Tehran? Or the Pentagon would do something else with different weapons? Or that America would act if there were more attacks or Iran directly initiated attacks? Americans were injured or Americans died? Or something else? For a supposedly "unmistakable message," its meaning was remarkably unclear.

But wait! The Pentagon put out a statement. Hopefully it was emailed to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. Said the Defense Department: "Georgia's presence in the US 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet area of operations (AOO) demonstrates the US Navy's ability to sail and operate wherever international law allows." Moreover, "As an inherently flexible maneuver force, capable of supporting routine and contingency operations, Georgia's presence demonstrates the United States' commitment to regional partners and maritime security with a full spectrum of capabilities to remain ready to defend against any threat at any time."

That should clear everything up!

Of course, this isn't the first message sent to Tehran. Two weeks ago, reported Associated Press, "In a new show of military might, two American bomber aircraft flew from the United States to the Middle East on Thursday, in a round-trip mission that US officials said covered a wide swath of the region and was a direct message of deterrence to Iran."

Here, too, the military, through Gen. Frank McKenzie, CENTCOM commander, explained: "The ability to fly strategic bombers halfway across the world in a nonstop mission and to rapidly integrate them with multiple regional partners demonstrates our close working relationships and our shared commitment to regional security and stability." One would have thought this message would have been sufficient without later adding the submarine voyage, but perhaps someone forgot to hit the "forward" button to send McKenzie's comment to Tehran.

Iran is not the only target of such "messages." North Korea is another regular recipient. For instance, in April 2017 the US struck Syria over its alleged use of chemical weapons. The *South China Morning Post* headlined its report: "US Sends Message to North Korea with Missile Strike on Syria." The article went on to report that "Washington's air strikes against the Syrian government while President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping dined in Florida would serve not only as a warning to the unruly North Korean regime, but also pile pressure on Pyongyang's ally Beijing, diplomatic and military experts say."

Later that year as tensions flared between the US and North Korea, the Associated Press ran a report entitled "US Flies Mission North of DMZ, Sends Message to North Korea." Explained the article: "In a show of American military might to North Korea, US bombers and fighter escorts flew on Saturday to the farthest point north of the border between North and South Korea by any such American aircraft this century. The Pentagon said the mission in international airspace showed how seriously President Donald Trump takes North Korea's 'reckless behavior'."

Apparently, there was no formal statement this time, but DOD spokesman Dana White observed: "This mission is a demonstration of US resolve and a clear message that the president has many military options to defeat any threat." Added White: "We are prepared to use the full range of military capabilities to defend the US; homeland and our allies."

Indeed, efforts to "educate" North Koreans have gone on for a long time, with little evident success. Perhaps that is due to the lack of mail service, so America's older messages went undelivered. For instance, in March 2013 the Obama administration sent a B-52 bomber and then two B-2 bombers over South Korea. Reuters titled its story: "US Flies Stealth Bombers over South Korea in Warning to North." Explained US Forces Korea, doing so "demonstrates the United States' ability to conduct long range, precision strikes quickly and at will." Another strong message apparently gone awry.

Russia, too, has been on the receiving end of many messages from Washington. For instance, last May the *Washington Times* ran an article headlined: "Navy's Sail-Through in Arctic Sends Message to Russia." What was the administration saying? "The Trump administration also has made no secret of the fact that it intends to push back on other nations – chiefly Russia, but also an increasingly emboldened and ambitious China – that seek to lay claim to strategically vital territory in the Arctic."

In March *Air Force Magazine* headlined a story: "US Sends Message to Russia, China in Africa." This message was long: "USAF leaders said the Feb. 15 flight was a direct message, not necessarily to the violent extremist groups armed with AK-47s and pickup trucks, but to global powers working to exert their influence on a continent that is becoming increasingly important to the global power structure. 'There's a message opportunity here, not just to al-Shabab and [violent extremist organizations] on the ground, but more broadly to Russia and China that: "Hey, we're competing with you down here, we're engaged here, we have high situational awareness as to what's going on, and we're going to use this opportunity to demonstrate that to the collective world", ' US Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa boss Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian told *Air Force Magazine*."

That was quite a mouthful, but it was not the only message to Moscow that apparently went awry. In May 2019, CBS News headlined one account: "US Sends Message to Russia with Aerial Military Exercises." Explained CBS: "One week after US fighter jets intercepted Russian bombers approaching Alaska airspace American-allied warplanes are sending a message to the Kremlin. They're taking part in aerial military exercises in the Arctic Circle."

The previous month CNN headlined one report: "US Warships Send a Powerful Message to Russia." Explained the station, "The United States is flexing its military muscles as a powerful

warning to Russia." Correspondent Frederik Pleitgen said the Pentagon was responding to Russia deployments in the Arctic, Black Sea, and Mediterranean Sea.

*The National Interest* paid even greater attention to the episode, headlining its story: "America Will Send Two Carriers to Send Russia a Message." The article asserted that "it would be hard for Russia to miss the intended message." Nevertheless, *TNI* went on to report the statement from the US ambassador to Russia, Jon Huntsman, who said: "Each of the carriers operating in the Mediterranean at this time represent 100,000 tons of international diplomacy." Moreover, "Diplomatic communication and dialogue coupled with the strong defense these ships provide demonstrate to Russia that if it truly seeks better relations with the United States, it must cease its destabilizing activities around the world."

Four years ago BBC reported that "NATO Sends A Message to Russia." The US decided to rotate an armored brigade to the alliance throughout Eastern Europe. Other European nations planned to send infantry battalions to do the same. The purpose, explained BBC, was to "send a clear message of deterrence towards Moscow."

These aren't the only cases, of course. Nor are these nations the only ones receiving such warnings from America.

How common yet ineffective such "messages" have become. Does the US believe repetition is necessary because its adversaries are particularly dull or forgetful? If so, why does it believe replicating the process will be more effective than before? None of America's antagonists seem to learn anything, or at least anything that Washington wants them to learn.

Of course, the people who are really dull or forgetful are in Washington. Do American policymakers believe that the Iranians, North Koreans, and Russians are unaware that the US possesses submarines, airplanes, and warships? And that other governments don't know that America is ready to go to war against anyone at any time for any reason – bombing, invading, and occupying other nations essentially at will, no matter how many people, even hundreds of thousands in the case of Iraq, might die? The US has repeatedly demonstrated its brutal belligerence since the end of the Cold War. Adding an occasional military joyride does not enhance America's reputation.

In fact, some Washington policymakers realize that sending ships and planes off on meaningless voyages is an expensive waste. Kathryn Wheelbarger and Dustin Walker, formerly of the Pentagon and Armed Services Committee staff, respectively, complained of the latest Gulf deployments: "This is business as usual, and it must stop. Sending the most advanced and expensive US conventional forces to the Middle East in response to every potential provocation isn't an effective or sustainable way to deter Iran's bad behavior. Continuing this approach wastes taxpayer dollars, drains military readiness, and deprives the US of ready forces need to compete with and deter China and Russia."

However, the strategy is worse than just unnecessary and wasteful. Washington policymakers believe that constantly threatening to bomb, invade, and occupy other nations keeps them in check. More likely, America's great military strength and repeated willingness to use it without

international constraint acts as an impetus for threatened states to develop deterrent capabilities – unconventional options, proxy forces, and particularly WMDs.

What have Washington's endless bliviations achieved? In its October military parade North Korea revealed that it has upgraded its conventional capabilities and developed missiles for submarines (SLBMs) as well as long-range missiles (ICBM's) capable of hitting the US. It appears that America's many messages were received only too well.

Tehran proposed to talk after the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq but before the occupation turned disastrous. After being rebuffed, the Iranians augmented their nuclear research and reprocessing. So much for Washington's message. After the Trump administration abandoned the nuclear accord and launched economic war on Iran the regime restarted its nuclear activities, interfered with Gulf traffic, destroyed Saudi oil facilities, sustained proxy forces in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and aided militias which attacked US bases and the embassy in Iraq. America's messages were clearly received, but not interpreted as Washington desired!

Russia has not backed down in Ukraine or Syria. It remains engaged with Cuba and Venezuela. It refuses to support US policy in Iran and North Korea. It continues to develop new weapons and otherwise augment its armed forces. It is apparent that Moscow was not impressed with Washington's messages.

Americans tend to see themselves as extraordinary, the only people on earth willing to stand firm. If the US just exhibits resolve and maintains credibility, it can bring the rest of the world to heel. But that assumption has been proved false again and again. In recent years Washington increasingly supplemented its military threats with brutal economic sanctions. The targets were many – Burma/Myanmar, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Russia, Sudan, Syria, and Venezuela. None of these countries broke and surrendered to Washington's demands. The young American republic responded similarly to pressure from foreign powers.

Americans complain that the world today is dangerous. However, it is the world that Washington did much to build. The US is the globe's most militaristic and aggressive power. The reason why warrants discussion elsewhere but the fact is undeniable. America has attacked as well as occupied far more nations than any other power. The consequences of just one of those interventions, Iraq, resulted in worse consequences than any Chinese action since the Korean War and any Russian action since World War II – including the Hungarian Revolution, in which "only" about 2500 Hungarians died and 200,000 became refugees, compared to hundreds of thousands and millions, respectively, in the case of Iraq.

Washington has compounded aggressiveness with faithlessness. What rational regime would trust America's word? The Obama administration made a nuclear deal. The Trump administration walked away from it, imposed even tougher sanctions, and demanded that Iran essentially surrender, abandoning an independent foreign policy.

The George W. Bush administration made a deal with Libya's Muammar Khadafy. He gave up his missile and nuclear programs. In return he was welcomed back into international society. He

even received Senators John McCain, Joe Lieberman, and Lindsey Graham, three of the body's uber-hawks, who discussed providing Libya with financial aid to reward its assistance in fighting terrorism. But when civil war broke out in 2011, the warmongering Senate troika led demands to oust his regime. Washington (and Europe) took him out. At the time North Korea noted that it would not make a similar mistake.

Every new threat merely reinforces America's record, acting as another argument for accelerating existing weapons programs and establishing new ones. The US is not the only country capable of sending a message. Iran demonstrated its ability to rain rockets down upon American facilities in Iraq. North Korea showcased its ability drop missiles throughout the Asia-Pacific and maybe in North America.

Constant US threats create another risk. The US already has demonstrated its willingness to attack weaker states to coerce or destroy. Frequent threats create a more unstable and threatening environment, in which target governments are more likely to fear attack. Especially when American leaders appear heedless of the costs on other players. Sen. Lindsey Graham famously claimed that the president was willing to go to war in Korea because the mass casualties would be "over there" rather than "over here."

Moreover, the militaries in Iran and North Korea are far weaker and may believe they must "use it or lose it," that is, they must act immediately or face utter destruction from sustained US air, drone, and cruise missile attacks. Thus, a combination of hostile US deployments and rhetoric could convince another government that attack was imminent, and therefore preemption was necessary. That could result in a war which no one intended.

By all means let's send a message to our adversaries. Washington is prepared to act militarily to defend its vital interests but war will always be a last resort. The best, and in most cases only, solution to international disputes is diplomacy and peace. The US will not attempt to rule the globe. American foreign policy will reflect these principles in the future.

That would be a welcome change for America after years of endless war.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*