

Why U.S. Power Does Not Deter Challenges

BY NUNO P. MONTEIRO, PH.D.

Well into the Obama presidency, the broadest foreign policy challenge facing the United States remains unmentioned.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has frequently threatened dire consequences for states that pursue policies contrary to its interests. But despite the formidable power that backs these threats, they are often ignored. When threatened with U.S. military action, Milosevic did not fold, the Taliban did not give in, nor did Saddam roll over. Similarly, Iran and North Korea continue to resist U.S. pressure to stop their nuclear programs. Despite their relative weakness vis-à-vis the world's sole superpower, all these states defied it.

In contrast, during the Cold War, U.S. threats were taken seriously by the Soviet Union, the world's other superpower. Despite their tremendous power, the Soviets were deterred from invading Western Europe and coerced into withdrawing their missiles from Cuba.

Why were U.S. threats heeded by another superpower but are now disregarded by far less powerful states? Two explanations are commonly offered. The first is that the United States is militarily overextended and needs to make more troops available or to augment its own power for its threats to be credible. The second is that while the Soviets were evil, they were also rational. The enemies of today, alas, are not.

Both these views are wrong. Despite being at war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States is capable of badly damaging any regime that defies it while

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suffering little itself. And America's new enemies are not more "irrational" than its old ones. If U.S. threats were able to deter shoe-slaming "we will bury you" Soviet premier Khrushchev with his 3,000 intercontinental nuclear weapons, why are we unable to stop Kim Jong-Il and his handful of rudimentary warheads—not to mention Ahmadinejad, who has none?

Because threats are not the problem. Deterrence and coercion do not only require credible threats that harm will follow from defiance. They require credible assurances that no harm will follow from compliance. In order for America to expect compliance with U.S. demands, it must persuade its foes that they will be punished if *and only if* they defy us.

During the Cold War, the balance of power between the two superpowers made assurances superfluous. Any U.S. attack on the Soviet Union would prompt Moscow to retaliate, imposing catastrophic costs on America. The prospect of an unprovoked U.S. attack was therefore unthinkable. Soviet power meant Moscow knew no harm would follow from complying with U.S. demands.

But in today's world, none of our enemies has the wherewithal to retaliate. U.S. threats, backed by the most powerful military in history, are eminently credible. The problem is the very same power advantage undermines the credibility of U.S. assurances. Our enemies feel vulnerable to an American attack even if they comply with our demands. They are therefore less likely to heed them.

As the world's most powerful state, the United States must work hard to assure other states that they are not at the mercy of an unpredictable behemoth.

This is particularly important in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, which many see, rightly or wrongly, as unprovoked. To make its assurances credible, the United States must restrain itself through multilateral action, a less aggressive military posture, and by pledging to eschew regime change. A failure to make American assurances credible will continue to hinder U.S. goals. As long as other regimes suspect we are bent on eliminating them even if they comply with our demands, it will be difficult to stop them from pursuing policies opposed to U.S. interests.

The same old problems will persist. Iran and North Korea will maintain their nuclear programs. China and Russia will become increasingly belligerent. And Burma and Sudan will maintain policies that further already endemic human rights abuses. In sum, non-credible assurances will lead to a world in which U.S. power fails to bring about the desired results in a peaceful manner. This should come as no surprise. It follows from the unparalleled power of the United States.