

Broadening the Reputation Debate Over Syria

Written by Vaughn Shannon

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VAUGHN SHANNON, SEP 28 2013

Much has happened in the month since a chemical weapons attack killed an estimated 1,400 people in Syria. The Obama Administration accused the Assad regime of perpetrating the attack, and threatened to punish them for the atrocity, suggesting the use of force even without UN or Congressional authorization. Obama then sought Congressional support, only to find he might not get it. International and domestic opposition to American force against Syria seemed to surprise the President, who vowed the need to act while opening a path for diplomacy. Thus was born the diplomatic deal by which Syria agreed to dismantle its chemical weapons and infrastructure. If all goes according to plan, inspectors will be “on the ground” in November, with a timetable for the destruction of the weapons completed by mid-2014.

The problem, of course, is what happens if all does *not* go according to plan. The Obama administration maintains that the threat of military action is on the table should Syria break its promise. Obama has argued that the threat of force is what brought Syria to the diplomatic solution in the first place, and the threat must continue to ensure the success of diplomacy.

So does reputation matter, and is it worth a military strike? Some observers fret that the U.S. may have already squandered its “reputation” by not attacking Syria after the famous “red line” was crossed. Congressman Peter King laments the reputational costs of showing weakness and Obama’s failing to “back up his own words”. Writing in May 2013, Press and Lind, and separately Mercer, argued that inaction to earlier chemical weapons use probably did not feed a reputation for irresolution. There are two matters of reputation I would add to build on this discussion of Syria and reputation: (1) broadening the dimensions of reputation to include credibility of message and legitimacy of action; and (2) recognizing the ways in which reputation is in the eye of the beholder.

Reputation for What?

When American security scholars and political elites talk about reputation, they mean a ‘reputation for resolve’, which Tingley and Walter define as

“a belief by others that a player who fought a challenger in the past will continue to fight challengers in the future, given a sufficiently similar situation.”

It is an important part of deterrence theory to signal potential future challengers that a country will “continue to be tough given similar circumstances”.

Tied to the Syria situation, the case for punishing Assad is to signal resolve and deter future chemical weapons use. In response to the (now UN-verified) use of sarin gas August 21, 2013, the U.S., France and U.K. saw a clear case for punishing the Assad regime to deter future attacks. So why was there so much push-back from the international community? One problem was the credibility of information. The British, French, and American governments signaled the willingness unilaterally to decide that (a) Assad’s government authorized the attack, even though a UN inspection team had yet to conclude an investigation; and (b) that such a violation required a military response. Obama and his peers confronted a lack of faith about American intentions and intelligence gathering since 2003 – the Iraq Effect. The Obama administration was very sure very early that there was an attack and it was by Assad, but

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that certainty was not shared by others partly due to the intelligence failures of the Iraq War. Even now the UN report has not assigned blame. Fair or not, Obama lives in the post-2003 intelligence credibility climate – and reputation for credible information matters.

The other reason many in the world hesitated over the rush to judgment rests in the matter of who has the authority to apportion blame and carry out some form of justice. The US, UK, and France proclaimed themselves judge and executioner, and the legitimacy of the process was questioned as it was in Kosovo in 1999. While chemical weapons use is a norm violation, another norm is that states should not attack other countries except (a) in self-defense, or (b) authorization by the UN Security Council. To attack a sovereign country simply out of moral outrage is against international law. This matters because norms affect how countries are perceived, and violation affects how willing and able countries are to stand by an intervening force. Power combined with the willingness to use it regardless of international norms and laws is a recipe for the fear and loathing of the U.S. “rogue superpower” as the Iraq War showed a decade ago. Only focusing on the need to “Say what we mean” (resolve) ignores the consequences of threat perception tied to doing anything a country wants. After all, why was Saddam Hussein so reviled if not for his norm-violating attack on sovereign Kuwait and chemical weapons attacks? Judgment of behavior relates to the legitimacy and social purpose of action, derived from the idea that “if decisions are legitimate they must be recognized as the fulfillment of recognized norms.”[1] The United States must be careful not to discard one norm due to the violation of another.

Eye of the Beholder

A second point about reputation builds off Mercer’s argument that reputation is to a substantial degree in the hands of others. Ethical analysis, according to Mark Amstutz, is based on intentions, means, and consequences; so if you “mean well,” act appropriately, and the outcome is good, you are ethical.

The problem is, different people perceive intentions, means, and consequences differently. Jervis notes that the way actions are read is determined by the perceivers’ needs, theories and expectations. Looking at punishing norm violators, Richard Herrmann and I have shown that American elites respond differently to the same norm violations based on who did it. My work with Michael Dennis suggests that biased attribution also affects the formation of reputations regarding the use of force. On the basis that motivated people see what they want to see, we showed that an enemy will not give credit for resolve, even as they benefit from the assistance (for example, the US role in Afghanistan in the 1980s). This suggests that some elements in Syria will not buy into the idea of American resolve but rather take credit for any victories that may come. Friends, on the other hand, should be willing to forgive US actions if it helps them, while lamenting US resolve if inaction hurts their cause.

If there is merit to this position, then inaction likely does affect our reputation with some, namely the Syrian rebels. But it also reminds us that not everyone, and not even every ally, learns the same “lesson” from American behavior. The Saudis, Israelis, and Free Syrian army may indeed be disheartened, but not Japan, South Korea, or NATO. For the disappointed, there are limits to what they can do in response, and there are options for the US in trying to reassure them. A BBC report notes how the U.S. is trying to “salvage” its reputation with the rebels by increasing aid. This shows, for what it’s worth, that there are more than one way to demonstrate resolve and loyalty to a cause, short of full-scale military action.

Why it Matters

The paradox of American power, as Cronin points out, is that the US is freest to be unilateral even as it stands as defender of the multilateral order it forged out of World War II. The question is whether multilateralism matters or, conversely, at what price comes unilateralism. Some realists suggest that those with power can do what they wish, and that US image does not matter so long as the US remains powerful. Others recognize that part of US success in sustaining its preponderance will be in projecting a benign image to the rest of international society.

Foreign public opposition to US actions can dampen support and cooperation for the US and its agenda, as we see in the British vote on action in Syria. Negative public opinion of the US has two consequences under this scheme,

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depending on the prior positions of the elites as sympathetic or unsympathetic to the US. An elite sympathetic to the US will tend to engage in distancing – constrained from supporting the US and criticizing it for its controversial actions – or risk their political survival backing the US. An unsympathetic elite engages in delegitimation – criticizing the US and its controversial acts to bolster their own legitimacy.[2] The result of these strategies marginalize the US and its actions, risking American overstretch and decline in the long run for want of support.

If a bombardment comes to Syria without UN Security Council authorization, the question of legitimacy will arise again. To maintain its position in the world, the U.S. has to care about our reputation for legitimacy as much as its reputation for resolve. That means process matters: doing the hard work of diplomacy that we have witnessed over the past two weeks with Secretary of State Kerry meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, and resolutions being debated in the Security Council. Even if this flurry of activity does not work, it holds Syria and the Russians to account and builds international support for any contingency plans for military action. The Security Council is a, perhaps frustrating, but important institution for managing American interests *and* the enforcing international norms. Letting Russia, China, and others be involved is not weakness, retrenchment, or appeasement; it's reassuring, cost-saving, good sense that may yield solutions to Syria's problems and to America's image abroad. Multilateralism may not assuage all fears of the superpower, but it may deny critics an opportunity to inflame anti-Americanism, and it permits friends to engage in cooperation and burden-sharing. This is not to say that the US should never engage in unilateral interventions, but that decision-makers add to their calculation the repercussions of actions for long-run American interests. The call for prudence, avoiding crusades of the left and nationalist unilateralism of the right, may be the best formula for managing American policy in Syria, avoiding the negative reactions that challenge America's long-term power and broader goals.

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[1] Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, (1975), p.101.

[2] These concepts are discussed and borrowed from Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power* (2005).

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