2. International Credibility and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Cold War

In a reflective mood at a meeting of the National Security Council, [President Lyndon Johnson] said that the fabric of international peace and stability was made up of sets of expectations held by all the nations of the world, whether enemies, allies, or neutrals, about how each of the others would behave in a crisis. If the United States let South Vietnam “go down the drain,” then every nation would have to reexamine its assumptions about its security position. Japan would have to ask itself whether it was wise to place itself under the American nuclear umbrella. Germany would have to rethink its position about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. In short, all of our friends and allies would have to think hard about their friendship with the United States... Also, if the United States lets South Vietnam be conquered, the whole geopolitical fabric of international politics will be rent; both friend and foe will be forced to reexamine their expectations and policies, inevitably to the detriment of the interests of the United States.

Roger Hilsman

In terms of international relations, the Cold War was the twentieth century’s defining experience. Key among the concepts governing the thinking of policymakers in both Washington and Moscow was the idea of credibility. “Throughout the post-World War II period,” writes historian Robert McMahon,

American leaders have explained, defended, and justified a wide range of diplomatic and military decisions by invoking the hallowed principle of credibility. They have argued with remarkable consistency, privately as well as publicly, that demonstrating the credibility of American power and American commitments ranked among the most critical of all U.S. foreign policy objectives. An elusive concept that defies precise definition, credibility has typically connoted for American decision makers a blend of resolve, reliability, believability, and decisiveness; equally important, it has served as a code word for America’s image and reputation. In an inherently dangerous and unstable world, according to this line of thought, peace and order depend to a great extent on Washington’s ability to convince adversaries and allies alike of its firmness, determination, and dependability.

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Clearly, this concern with credibility has been central to U.S. foreign policy since World War II. That experience changed forever the way in which America perceived its place in the world. The failure of appeasement at Munich, for one, convinced U.S. leaders that peace could not be won through capitulation, but only as a result of the credible threat to use force in response to aggression. And the isolationist myth was shattered; Pearl Harbor taught U.S. leaders that their country’s domestic security was no longer protected by intervening oceans; global disequilibriums could no longer be understood as far-off and unimportant.3

The general vision that emerged in Washington after the cessation of hostilities in 1945 was of a stable and peaceful international system compatible with U.S. security interests and open to trade, commerce, and investment. Aggression like Hitler’s must never again be allowed to predicate global disruption. Post-war concerns over potential threats to peace and stability soon became linked to Soviet adventurism, however, not Germany; perceptions of increased Soviet irascibility and the 1948 Czechoslovakian coup reinforced this trend.4 A stabilizing international defense network was required to enforce the peace, and a credible superpower—a “hegemonic power capable of enforcing rules of behavior...and punishing or isolating those who refused to accede to those rules”—was needed to lead that network and guarantee its effectiveness.5 As early as 1946, Washington—whether entangled by its worried European allies or consciously determined to take up the mantle of the

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eclipsed British Empire—assumed leadership of a security safety-net of allies and clients that stretched from Europe to Asia.\(^6\) And soon the United States was obligated to demonstrate—in Greece, in Berlin—the credibility of the West’s determination to prevent Soviet influence from spreading.

While the solidarity of the alliance was, to some extent, woven of the common thread of liberal capitalism, shared concern over the reemergence of a unified Germany, and fear of Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe, Washington soon found itself hard pressed not only to demonstrate to its adversaries that America was powerful and determined enough to defend western interests, but to convince its allies of that fact as well. Only if the U.S. showed itself to be a committed and capable superpower would its partners believe that membership in the alliance was to their benefit and that American presidents would use the power at their disposal to protect western interests.

And U.S. policymakers deemed that successful containment of the Soviets depended not simply on the deterrence provided by military might—Washington also had to effectively orchestrate the actions of a large association of world powers if the Soviets were to fully believe in the credibility of U.S. power.\(^7\) If the United States were unable, on the other hand, to maintain alliance cohesion and coordinate the behavior of its flotilla of clients, then the

\(^6\)Significant multilateral pacts included the Rio Pact (1947) which bound together the American states; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, 1949), which sought to deter Soviet designs on Europe; ANZUS (1952), that forged an alliance in the southern Pacific between Australia, New Zealand and the U.S.; and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, or SEATO (1955), which aspired to be a counterpart to NATO. Bilateral alliances were established with Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines, as were informal agreements such as America’s “silent partnership” in the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), its commitment to Israel’s defense, and support of various Third World governments through economic and military assistance. See Sabrosky, p. 7.
global teeter-totter would incline toward the East. Ultimately, the West’s deterrent credibility was seen to depend as much on alliance unity as on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.8 A key component of this logic was the notion that exhibitions of non-aligned nationalism, or even of neutrality, by formerly allied nations would do serious damage to America’s stature as an international power. NSC-68 appraised the situation this way: “in the context of the present polarization of power a defeat...anywhere is a defeat everywhere.”9 The periphery was no longer peripheral,10 Henry Kissinger explained, because “[e]vents that used to be local assume global significance.”

While the notion of credibility in great-power affairs is not new, the advent of nuclear weapons drastically changed the manner in which it was understood, asserted, and measured.12 One major side-effect of the nuclear threat was the increased importance of perceptions and symbolic actions in diplomatic affairs.13 Given the potential for nuclear disaster, signals needed to be articulated in certain ways. The use of limited warfare in peripheral areas as a

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8McMahon, p.455.
13McMahon, p. 469.
political tool became a common practice; military intervention became a method of international communication. As John Lewis Gaddis writes:

> antagonists in [the Cold War] tended to calculate victories in terms of failures, retreats, and humiliations inflicted upon their opposites. Symbolic triumphs often exceeded the value of the territories in which they occurred...the game itself was what counted, rather than whatever it was the game was supposed to accomplish. Reputation emerged as a vital interest, with credibility the standard against which to measure it.

Indeed, Henry Kissinger, the archetypal Cold-War strategist, wrote in 1966 that “the symbolic aspect of foreign policy [may] overshadow the substantive component.”

And so expressions of U.S. credibility were by no means limited to military action. Although military capability may have remained the equation’s lowest common denominator, the overarching “task” was, in the words of Soviet scholar Evgenii Varga, “to determine the condition of the opponent.” Was the president credible in the eyes of his allies, and therefore able to elicit a coherent and effective response from them? Did America possess the will and resolve to back up its commitments with force? As a result, American Cold War presidents came to believe that they must be extraordinarily careful that their statements and actions always send the proper signal. If a signal of irresolution is conveyed or an image of weakness projected, even in an area of peripheral strategic and economic value, American credibility could be severely damaged, possibly leading either allies or adversaries to take actions detrimental to the United States in

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18Quoted in Trout, p. 275
vital areas...In short, this world-view posits an interdependence among commitments, interests, and threats that makes any area of the world potentially vital to U.S. interests.\textsuperscript{19}

Guided by this logic, U.S. leaders sought to protect what Dean Rusk once termed “the sanctity” of American commitments.\textsuperscript{20} The credibility of U.S. commitments—Washington’s willingness to back up promises and threats with action—evolved into its “badge of world leadership.”\textsuperscript{21} Rusk proselytized that “if it should be discovered that the pledge of the United States is meaningless, the structure of peace would crumble and we would be well on our way to a terrible catastrophe.”\textsuperscript{22} A failure in the South could mean a disaster in the Orient; conversely, the demonstration of credibility in one place had an overall positive effect on the entire spectrum of U.S. foreign policy interests. Ultimately, almost everything and nearly every place mattered.

The Cold War period provides many examples of how Washington’s concern with its international credibility drove its foreign policymaking. For instance, the Truman administration perceived Kim-il Sung’s June 25, 1950 invasion of South Korea as a direct challenge to U.S. credibility abroad. The June invasion appeared to demonstrate that the United States had repeated the failures of Munich and Czechoslovakia: the United States had withdrawn its troops from the Korean peninsula in 1949, and in January 1950 Secretary of

\textsuperscript{19} McMahon, p. 457.
\textsuperscript{21} Weinstein, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{22} Quoted in Ibid.
State Acheson announced that Taiwan and South Korea did not fall within the American defensive perimeter. Washington’s response to North Korea’s aggression was predictable:

> Given the risk of having [Korea] demonstrate again that aggression did pay; the extent to which the United States feared a collapse of psychological self-confidence among allies if that should happen; given the Truman administration’s sensitivity to the charge that it had done nothing to save Chiang Kai-shek’s China...nothing could have been better calculated to provoke a sharp American response than what Kim II-sung persuaded Stalin and Mao to let him do.\(^\text{24}\)

A U.S. failure to offer a credible response to Communist aggression in Korea, Secretary of State Dean Acheson later reflected, would have been “highly destructive of the power and prestige of the United States.”\(^\text{25}\) An internal State Department study prepared the day of Sung’s invasion asserted that Korea’s fall to communism would “cause significant damage to U.S. prestige in western Europe. The capacity of a small Soviet satellite to engage in a military adventure challenging, as many Europeans will see it, the might and will of the U.S., can only lead to serious questioning of that might and will.”\(^\text{26}\) Truman himself later wrote that he “felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall, communist leaders would be emboldened.”\(^\text{27}\)

> These worries drove U.S. policymakers toward intervention. “The Korean conflict,” McMahon writes, “plainly challenged American interests much less than it tested American...”\(^\text{28}\)

\(^{23}\)Gaddis, Know, p. 72.
\(^{24}\)Ibid., pp. 75-76.
\(^{27}\)Ibid. in McMahon, p. 459.
credibility.”

A strong and effective response could have an overall positive effect on U.S. foreign policy across the globe, however, by demonstrating U.S. resolve and capacity to Moscow, and signaling to allies that Washington’s commitment to them was firm. “By sending unambiguous signals of strength and resolution, in short, a broad range of U.S. policy goals would be served,” McMahon argues, pointing out that

Within three days of the North Korean invasion, the army tried to identify these goals. A firm American response in Korea, it argued, would 1) Create universal respect for United States’ determination to support the United Nations Charter principles with physical measures, 2) Enhance the prestige of United States leadership, 3) Make a profoundly favorable impression on the Japanese, 4) Bolster the West German government’s orientation toward the West, 5) Probably firm up the British attitude against Communist China, 6) Lift interest and effort to obtain more concrete action under NATO, [and] 7) Bolster French morale on its Indochina program.

There is perhaps no more dramatic example of the links between credibility concerns and White House foreign policymaking than the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The preoccupation of four presidents with Southeast Asia’s effect on the United States’ international reputation led Washington to attach such an inordinate symbolic importance to Vietnam that credibility, ultimately, became the central issue in that conflict. John F. Kennedy, for example, firmly believed that American power was firmly pegged to overseas perceptions regarding its credibility; indeed, the moral of his 1940 book Why England Slept—that the demonstration of vigilance and resolve were the vital components of great power foreign policy—shaped his strategic vision throughout his entire political career. Kennedy’s Vietnam policy was clearly driven by such perceptions. His actions there, he
observed in late 1961, would be “examined on both sides of the Iron Curtain...as a measure of the administration’s intentions and determination.”32 Kennedy’s Secretaries of State and Defense, Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara, concurred. In a 1961 memo to the president they argued that “[t]he loss of South Vietnam to Communism would not only destroy SEATO but would undermine the credibility of American commitments elsewhere.”33

Kennedy’s successor in office, former Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, shared his predecessor’s view that a symbolic show of resolve (or a failure to do so) in Vietnam would have global consequences.34 LBJ’s 1965 decision to escalate the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was guided by his belief that

[a]round the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well-being rests, in part on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Vietnam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America’s word.35

Johnson’s National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, agreed that “[t]here is one grave weakness in our posture in Vietnam which it is within our power to fix—and that is the widespread belief that we do not have the will and force and patience and determination to take the necessary action and stay the course.”36 Johnson reiterated this perspective in his memoirs, writing that a failure to commit in Vietnam would have meant that “[o]ur allies not

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just in Asia but throughout the world would conclude that our word was worth little or nothing.” Such failure would leave American allies “deeply shaken and vulnerable,” he recollected. “I was as sure as a man could be that if we did not live up to our commitment in Southeast Asia and elsewhere” the communists “would move to exploit the disarray in...the alliances of the Free World.”

Most U.S. officials shared LBJ’s opinion. “If we leave Vietnam with our tail between our legs,” General Maxwell Taylor declared in 1964, “the consequences of this defeat in the rest of Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be disastrous.” A 1965 memorandum by Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton explained the U.S. involvement in Vietnam as “70 percent to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat.” McNaughton asserted that even if its Vietnam policy meant the U.S. would be “bloodied,” the United States “must have kept promises [and] avoid[ed] harmful appearances which will affect judgments by, and provide pretext to, other nations regarding how the U.S. will behave in future cases of particular interest to those nations.” Some Johnson advisors dissented, such as Under Secretary of State George Ball, but still framed their arguments in terms of U.S. credibility. “We cannot win, Mr. President,” Ball said at a 1965 meeting. “The war will be long and protracted. The most we can hope for is a messy conclusion.” The result, he predicted gloomily, “would be that the mightiest power on earth is unable to defeat a handful of guerrillas.”

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Johnson had complained that Vietnam “worries the hell out of me. I don’t see what we can ever hope to get out of this once we’re committed,” and in 1965 he replied to Ball, “[b]ut George, wouldn’t all these countries say that Uncle Sam was a paper tiger, wouldn’t we lose credibility breaking the word of three presidents, if we did as you have proposed?”

The logic of the Nixon-Kissinger team toward Vietnam was based on similar assumptions. “[T]he commitment of 500,000 Americans has settled the issue of the importance of Vietnam,” Kissinger asserted in 1969. “For what is involved now is confidence in American promises.” Although Nixon planned to initiate a withdrawal of troops from Southeast Asia, he sought to do so in a way that would not damage U.S. credibility any more than the protracted, unresolved war already had. Washington could not simply pull out of Vietnam overnight, Nixon said, because

[a] nation cannot remain great if it betrays its allies and lets down its friends. Our defeat and humiliation in South Vietnam without question would promote recklessness in the councils of those great powers who have not yet abandoned their goals of world conquest. This would spark violence wherever our commitments help maintain the peace—in the Middle East, in Berlin, eventually even in the Western Hemisphere.

Nixon maintained that “[i]f when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation—the United States of America—acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.”

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41LBJ’s Second Thoughts, p. 26.
42Quoted in Johnson Questions in The Makings of America, p. 409.
43Quoted in Jentleson, p. 676.
The experience in Vietnam was a major turning point in U.S. policymakers’ concern with American credibility abroad. The fact that the entire military might of the United States had been driven off the Vietnamese Peninsula by a band of sandal-clad guerrillas convinced many U.S. leaders that the United States was now viewed as a crumbling power overseas, fatigued from over extension and unable to sustain its commitments. The image of the last American helicopters fleeing Saigon in 1975 made an indelible impression upon U.S. officials, who worried that America’s failure had worked “to weaken [allies] and embolden...adversaries,” one analyst observes. “[T]he effect was to raise serious doubts about the credibility of American power.”

Kissinger later lamented that “[t]he collapse in 1975...ushered in a period of American humiliation, an unprecedented Soviet geopolitical offensive all over the globe, and pervasive insecurity, instability, and crisis.” And ten years after the fall of Saigon, Richard Nixon wrote that the defeat in Vietnam paralyzed America’s will to act in other Third World trouble spots and therefore encouraged aggression...Over the next five years, Soviet clients and proxy forces unleashed a geopolitical offensive that led to stunning reversals for the United States in virtually every region of the world, [for example] the fall one by one of Laos, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen and Nicaragua.

As Washington’s national security establishment mulled over its failure in Vietnam, the post-Watergate presidency of James Carter tried to chart a foreign policy course that did

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46Jentleson, p. 668.
not assume the inviolability of U.S. commitments as its underlying principle, but which instead sought to substitute a sort of “moral credibility” for the conventional notion of credibility. For many the results proved disastrous and, unsurprisingly, when global events appeared to indicate an increased threat to U.S. interests, the pressured administration quickly returned to more familiar strategies.

For instance, when Carter removed nuclear weapons from Korea without demanding a reciprocal concession from the USSR, the Soviets pressed forward with an arms build up and involved themselves in Angola and the Horn of Africa. In December 1979 they invaded Afghanistan. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski concluded that the lack of a credible U.S. response to Soviet activities had emboldened the Kremlin. 49 This demonstration of Soviet expansionism—coupled with the intensification of Marxist insurrections in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the imminent collapse of the Shah of Iran, a long-time ally, and resistance from the NATO allies (in particular, West Germany) to U.S. foreign policy initiatives—meant that human rights considerations vanished from U.S. foreign policy planning. On February 24, 1978, Brzezinski sent Carter a memo telling him to keep in mind that

[a] President must not only be loved and respected, but also feared. I suggest that you try to dispel the impression that you and the Administration are too cerebral by picking some controversial subject and acting with anger and roughness to demonstrate that no one can pick a fight with the U.S. If we do not do this soon, Begin, Brezhnev, Vorster, Schmidt, Castro, and Qaddafi will thumb their noses at us. 50

Increasingly concerned that its international credibility was faltering, the Carter team withdrew SALT II from Senate consideration, increased defense spending, placed an oil and grain embargo against the Soviets, and announced the lifting of restrictions inhibiting CIA activities abroad. Brzezinski explained that “weakness on the part of the United States can create openings and temptations for our ideological opponents to exploit turbulence for their own selfish ends.” “There is no doubt,” the President affirmed, “that the Soviets’ move into Afghanistan, if done without adverse consequences, would...result[] in the temptation to move again and again.” Similarly, after imposing a U.S. boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, Carter asserted that “if our [...] team had been in Moscow these past days...it would have been impossible for us credibly to maintain our leadership on the world scale in our continuing effort to seek freedom in Afghanistan.” The message would have been, he explained, that “the United States might not like the idea of aggression and the deprivation of freedom for people, but when it really comes down to it, we are willing to join the parade as if nothing had happened.”

But the Iran hostage crisis, not Soviet aggression, soon became the greatest challenge to the Carter administration’s credibility. From the start, Carter’s response to the situation was muddled and indecisive. After the Ayatollah Khomeini stated publicly that the United

States did not have the courage to use military force in order to resolve the dilemma, the perception grew that the entire nation was being held hostage. At a November press conference one reporter voiced the question on everyone’s minds: “how do we get out of this mess in Iran and still retain credibility with our allies and with our adversaries overseas?”

A surgical intervention was eventually opted for, but the mission proved to be a ghastly failure. Brzezinski had argued that the mission would serve as a “demonstration of American toughness,” but instead it seemed to reveal the U.S. as a besieged and inept giant. During the 1979 primary season GOP presidential hopeful George Bush warned that Carter’s leadership had led to “the diminution of U.S. credibility and respect around the world” and a “window of danger” that could only be reversed by “letting our allies know that we will keep our commitments.”

The man who defeated Bush for the Republican nomination, Ronald Reagan, exploded onto the national consciousness as a patriot-zealot whose avowed mission was to restore the international credibility that Vietnam and Carter had destroyed. After his electoral victory, Reagan rapidly moved to send clear signals of an America once again vigilant and prepared. The Soviet Union had used détente, the new President declared at his first press conference, “as a one-way street...to pursue its own aims,” and the administration set out to erase all traces of what Secretary of State Alexander Haig dubbed “the Carter

experiment in obsequiousness.”\textsuperscript{58} Carter’s projected increases in defense expenditures were raised, the B-1 bomber program was re-authorized, improvements in ground combat readiness were ordered, and construction of new naval vessels commenced.\textsuperscript{59} On the diplomatic front, Reagan assumed a hard-line stance, fighting, for example, West European efforts to build a natural gas pipeline to carry Siberian fuel and pressuring New Zealand to reverse its ban against nuclear vessels entering its territorial waters.\textsuperscript{60} Haig later reflected that “[t]he morning of an Administration...is the best time to send signals.” Reagan planned to send two, he wrote:

> our signal to the Soviets had to be a plain warning that their time of unrequited adventuring in the Third World was over and that America’s capacity to tolerate the mischief of Moscow’s proxies, Cuba and Libya, had been exceeded. Our signal to other nations must be equally simple and believable: once again, a relationship with the United States brings dividends, not just risks.\textsuperscript{61}

The Middle East quickly presented itself as a challenge to the tough-talking Reagan. Disturbed that increased terrorist activity and Soviet influence in the region revealed “a basic and ominous” threat, Reagan’s foreign policy team—with little success—sought to convince Arabs and Israelis to resolve their disputes. When Israel invaded Lebanon in early June 1982, Reagan sent troops to the Middle East as part of a multinational peacekeeping force.\textsuperscript{62} In October 1982 U.S. troop levels in the region were increased as a result of the assassination of Lebanon’s president-elect Bashir Gemayel and retaliatory violence by Lebanese

phalangists against Palestinian refugees. President Reagan defended the deployment by declaring that U.S. “credibility on a global scale” was at stake. Drawing on that logic, Deputy National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane convinced Democratic congressmen to support the move, as Tip O’Neill later wrote, by arguing that the Marines were a “symbol of American power and prestige.” By August 1983 U.S. forces were entrenched around the Beirut airport, sporadically exchanging gunfire with various factions in Lebanon’s civil war; in September, the navy began bombing raids against these factions and Syrian air defense units. This increased participation on the side of the Lebanese Christians made American ground troops a target, and on October 23 a suicide bomber attacked a U.S. bunker and killed 241 marines, many of whom never made it out of their beds.

The attack was a major blow to the administration’s efforts to project an image of U.S. strength, and placed the new president in a precarious position. According to Secretary of State George Shultz,

[i]f America’s efforts for peaceful solutions are overwhelmed by brute force, our role in the world is that much weakened everywhere. Friends who rely on us will be disheartened and will be that much less secure...if we are driven out of Lebanon, radical and rejectionist elements will have scored a major victory. The message that will be sent is that relying on the Soviet Union pays off and that relying on the United States is a fatal mistake.

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The eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Lebanon in 1984, many U.S. policymakers assessed, “had a negative effect on allies in both Europe and the Middle East,” and threatened to cut Reagan’s push for renewed American credibility off at the knees.\textsuperscript{68} The administration rapidly opted to focus its efforts closer to home, in Latin America.