FIGHTING FOR CREDIBILITY

US Reputation and International Politics

FRANK P. HARVEY AND JOHN MITTON

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When Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against his own people in Syria, he clearly crossed President Barack Obama's "red line." At the time, many argued that the president had to bomb in order to protect America's reputation for toughness, and therefore its credibility, abroad; others countered that concerns regarding reputation were overblown, and that reputations are irrelevant for coercive diplomacy.

Whether international reputations matter is the question at the heart of *Fighting for Credibility*. For skeptics, past actions and reputations have no bearing on an adversary's assessment of credibility; power and interests alone determine whether a threat is believed. Using a nuanced and sophisticated theory of rational deterrence, Frank P. Harvey and John Mitton argue the opposite: ignoring reputations sidesteps important factors about how adversaries perceive threats. Focusing on cases of asymmetric US encounters with smaller powers since the end of the Cold War including Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Syria, Harvey and Mitton reveal that reputations matter for credibility in international politics. This dynamic and deeply documented study successfully brings reputation back to the table of foreign diplomacy.

FRANK P. HARVEY is Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Dalhousie University where he also holds the Eric Dennis Chair of Government and Politics.

JOHN MITTON is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie University and a Fulbright Visiting Researcher at the University of Southern California.

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 3
Chemical Weapons in Syria, 2012–13 5
Credibility and International Politics: The Case for Reputations 5
Credibility and International Politics: The Case against Reputations 14
Coercive Outcome in Syria 21
Syria as a Deterrence/Compellence "Success"? 23
Postscript 25
Outline and Objectives 28

1 Reputations Research and Premature Closure of Inquiry 30
The Press-Mercer-Hopf Consensus 31
1.1 Hopf (1994) "Peripheral Visions" 38
1.2 Press (2005) "Calculating Credibility" 41
1.3 Mercer (1996) "Reputation and International Politics" 46
Premature Closure of Inquiry: An Illustration 50
1.4 Application of P-M-H Consensus Excludes Important Research on International Reputations 54
The Missing Scholarship 55
Conclusion 69

2 Reputations Matter: Rational Deterrence Theory and Credibility Reconsidered 71
2.1 Four Core Prerequisites of Credible Coercive Threats 72
RDT and Necessity and Sufficiency 76
Reassessing Fearon 79

2.2 Reputations and Imperfect Information 82
2.3 Similarity and Transferability of Reputations and Credibility 88
2.4 Reputations and Miscalculations 93
2.5 General versus Specific Reputations 96
2.6 Reputations, Credibility, and Transferability Are in the Eyes of the Beholder 99
Conclusion 104

3 US Reputation Building in Deterrence Encounters, 1991–2003 105
Case 1 – Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–5) 108
Case 2 – Kosovo (1998–9) 120
Case 3 – Iraq (1991–2003) 135
Conclusion 148

4 The Strategic Logic of US Coercion: Explaining Deterrence Failures and Successes in Syria, 2011–13 149
4.1 Defining Success in Syria 150
4.2 Syria: RDT versus P-M-H 157
US Reputations and Past Actions 162
Escalation and Mission Creep 164
4.3 Protracted Crises, Probes, and Tipping Points 168
Assad's Miscalculations 171
4.4 Credibility Paradox – Punishments and Promises 175
4.5 Summary and Conclusions 177
Extremes Are Wrong 177
Relevant Reputations (and Credibility) Are in the Eyes of the Beholder 178
Similarities, Differences, and Relevant Cases 179

5 RDT, Domestic Politics, and Audience Costs 181
5.1 Domestic Politics, US Credibility, and the Eyes of the Beholder 185
Domestic Politics, Past Actions, and Reputations 187

6 Reputations, Credibility, and Transferability: Reconsidering Syria's Relevance to Iran, North Korea, and Beyond 191
6.1 Why Transferability Matters 197
6.2 Complex Credibility and Transferability 202
Complex Credibility in Syria 202
6.3 Iran, Transferability, and the Credibility Paradox Revisited 210

7 Responding to Critics: Alternative Explanations and Competing Policy Recommendations 212
7.1 Alternative Explanations for the Syria Disarmament Deal 212
7.2 The Real Costs of Bluffing in Syria 216
P-M-H Consensus: Reputations Are Irrelevant, so Bluffing Is Costless 217
7.3 Bluffing and Bad Poker Analogies: What the Critics Miss 221
Why Bluffing Matters 221
When Bluffing Matters 224
Why Bluffing in International Politics Is Not Like Poker 225
Unintended Consequences of Congressionally Endorsed Bluffing 229
8 Expanding Theory-Policy Gaps in International Relations 232
8.1 Theory-Policy Gap(s) and Confirmation Bias(es) 233
8.2 Theory-Policy Gaps and Confirmation Bias: The Case of Post-Iraq Intelligence Reform 237
8.3 Theory-Policy Gaps and Confirmation Bias: The Case of Coercive Diplomacy in Syria, 2013 240
Richard Price on Syria 241
Jonathan Mercer on Syria 244
Stephen Walt on Syria 246
Establishing Continuity in US Foreign Policy 251
8.4 From Policy to Theory: The "MIT School" and Syria 255

References 265

Index 293

FIGHTING FOR CREDIBILITY

US Reputation and International Politics

Introduction

Is fighting for credibility prudent? Does a failure to follow through on a coercive diplomatic or military threat undermine a leader's credibility? Can leaders or states acquire reputations from adversaries for being resolute or irresolute? How do these reputations emerge or change, and are they transferable from one context (administration, opponent, time frame, issue area, region, or crisis) to another? These critically important questions framed the foreign policy debate following the sarin gas attacks by the Syrian military in the late summer of 2013; they also exemplify the ongoing debates in the field of international relations regarding the connection between reputations (particularly a reputation for resolve) and credibility. This book directly challenges the emerging consensus that reputations and past actions are irrelevant to credibility, or that reputations are independent, non-transferable, and, therefore, never worth fighting for.

A focus on reputations is important for at least three reasons. First, as Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth recently noted in their review of the literature, the proportion of articles dealing with reputations in conflict settings has increased over the past four decades.[1] Arguably, research

1 See Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014. What follows is the authors' description of the methodology they used to "estimate the interest in reputation and status in the study of international relations in four prominent journals: *International Security*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *American Political Science Review*, and *Foreign Affairs*. Plot is a smoothed estimate of the proportion of articles referencing 'war' that also reference one of the following keywords: 'reputation,' 'honor OR honour,' or 'prestige.' 'Status' is not included as a keyword because this term is too often used in other, unrelated contexts (e.g., 'status quo'). Interest in these topics has been prevalent

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on the credibility and effectiveness of coercive diplomacy is becoming more important, because deterring (controlling) escalation of military-security crises constitutes a core feature of the foreign policies of the US and its key allies, as our case studies will illustrate.

Second, several major works over the past two decades have questioned the relevance of reputation for determining the credibility of coercive threats. Protecting and reinforcing a reputation for resolve has long been considered a cornerstone of effective coercive diplomacy,[2] but this standard assumption has been systematically challenged in qualitative research by Daryl Press, Jonathan Mercer, and Ted Hopf[3] – hereafter referred to as P-M-H. Reputations, this research concludes, are irrelevant; past behavior has no bearing on future credibility, so backing down or bluffing carries no consequences for subsequent confrontations – crisis behavior is essentially a product of comparative interests and capabilities (power). However, despite being embraced by a growing number of scholars, the findings from this particular research program have never been subjected to the kind of systematic theoretical and empirical analysis they demand. This oversight is particularly troubling in light of the propensity by many experts to issue foreign policy advice that relies heavily on findings from P-M-H, which brings us to our next point.

Heated debates about reputations resurfaced during the Syrian chemical weapons (CW) crisis in 2013. Many high-profile scholars and foreign policy analysts (bloggers, journalists, and academics) repeatedly cited evidence from P-M-H to mount what they believed was a rock solid case against the Obama administration's coercive strategy in Syria. In fact, these findings were presented as definitive "proof" that fighting to protect a credible reputation for resolve was foolish; there was no logical or military-strategic reason for Obama to reinforce his red-line threat (issued in August 2012), even if that threat failed to

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throughout the twentieth century. In recent decades, interest in 'reputation' and possibly 'honor' seems to be increasing; interest in (or terminological preference for) 'prestige' has declined. We do not identify any notable persistent differences across journals. 95% confidence intervals provide an assessment of whether the observed proportions could have come from the same underlying distribution. Data and R code are available at http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/22179."

2 For an excellent review of the work of Alexander George and his contributions to the study of deterrence and coercive diplomacy, see Levy 2008.

3 See Press 2005; Mercer 1996; and Hopf 1994.

prevent the Syrian regime from launching the attacks on civilians in Ghouta in 2013. In a largely unanticipated about-face, however, Bashar al-Assad agreed to dismantle his CW capability under the threat of unilateral US air strikes. This outcome, we argue, represents a major coercive diplomatic success that raises serious questions about assertions inspired by P-M-H regarding the irrelevance of reputations. The research we present in our book demonstrates the exact opposite: reputations matter.

Understanding the causes and consequences of inter-state interactions during the Syria case, buttressed in the following chapters by significant empirical evidence derived from post–Cold War crises involving the US in asymmetric conflicts, will broaden our understanding of reputations in international relations. Our goal is to extract important lessons about the theory and practice of coercive diplomacy based on evidence from over two decades of crisis behavior, drawing out the causal implications for what happened in Syria; it is impossible to explain Syria's (and Russia's) capitulation to the multilaterally endorsed UN disarmament agreement without appreciating the lessons learned by opponents (including Assad) about US resolve and credibility in previous cases. Our objective is not to assess the foreign policy legacy of the Obama administration, or the success/failure of Washington's overall Syria strategy – it is to contribute to the literature on reputations in international politics, rational deterrence theory, and the relevance of past actions when adversaries assess the credibility of US coercive threats.

Chemical Weapons in Syria, 2012–13

A brief account of the 2012–13 Syria crisis will help position the book's main thesis in relation to the policy debates that unfolded at the time.

Credibility and International Politics: The Case for Reputations

In response to the August 2013 sarin attacks, President Obama joined senior members of his national security team in repeatedly emphasizing – in every press conference and congressional testimony – the linked imperatives to enforce global prohibitions on the use of chemical weapons by reinforcing the credibility of the president's "red-line" warning

(issued a year earlier):[4] "We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that's a *red line* for us and that there would be *enormous consequences* if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. That would change my calculations significantly." Almost exactly one year later, on 21 August 2013, the Syrian military launched a series of sarin gas attacks against rebel strongholds throughout the Ghouta agricultural belt east of Damascus, killing 1400 Syrians (including 400 children). Bashar al-Assad's flagrant disregard of the red-line threat represented a clear case of US deterrence failure. Punitive air strikes against the regime, Obama's team argued, were now essential to bolster Washington's credibility (particularly in light of its failure to respond to eleven previous chemical attacks by the Syrian military), provide additional military support to the insurgency, impose costs on Assad for violating a widely endorsed international norm, and strengthen the administration's reputation for enforcing red lines tied to this and other deterrent threats – a message directed, in part, at officials in Iran and North Korea.[5] The success or failure of coercive diplomacy in Syria, administration officials warned, was connected in some way to the looming nuclear crisis with Iran.[6]

Obama issued the following warning at the time in an effort to boost support for a stronger response, linking the costs of the current crisis to risks beyond Syria:[7]

> If we fail to act, the Assad regime will see no reason to stop using chemical weapons. As the ban against these weapons erodes, other tyrants will have no reason to think twice about acquiring poison gas, and using them [*sic*]. Over time, our troops would again face the prospect of chemical

4 See White House 2013a (emphasis added). For a complete review of the red-line threat and subsequent related statements, see Kessler 2013.

5 With respect to US–Iran relations, for example, the president had already issued a separate red-line warning in March 2013 (in an interview with Israel's Channel 2 News): "I have been crystal clear about my position on Iran possessing a nuclear weapon. That is a red line for us. It is not only something that would be dangerous for Israel. It would be dangerous for the world" (quoted in Carter 2013).

6 Mead (2013) provides a good summary of the political costs to the president if he would have decided in favor of backing away from his now-reinforced deterrent threats: "If Obama doesn't bomb Syria now, he's toast."

7 White House 2013c, emphasis added.

warfare on the battlefield. And it could be easier for terrorist organizations to obtain these weapons, and to use them to attack civilians. If fighting spills beyond Syria's borders, these weapons could threaten allies like Turkey, Jordan, and Israel. *And a failure to stand against the use of chemical weapons would weaken prohibitions against other weapons of mass destruction, and embolden Assad's ally, Iran* – which must decide whether to ignore international law by building a nuclear weapon, or to take a more peaceful path.

... After careful deliberation, I determined that it is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike. The purpose of this strike would be to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, to degrade his regime's ability to use them, *and to make clear to the world that we will not tolerate their use.*[8]

The same sentiments regarding US credibility and the importance of Washington's reputation for following through on its threats were expressed by senior members of the administration in congressional testimony. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, for example, issued the following warning about lost credibility in his prepared statement in early September 2013:

The Syrian regime's actions risk eroding the nearly century-old international norm against the use of chemical weapons ... *Weakening this norm could embolden other regimes to acquire or use chemical weapons.* For example, North Korea maintains a massive stockpile of chemical weapons that threatens our treaty ally, the Republic of Korea, and the 28,000 US troops stationed there. I have just returned from Asia, where I had a very serious and long conversation with South Korea's Defense Minister about the threat that North Korea's stockpile of chemical weapons presents to them. *Our allies throughout the world must be assured that the United States will fulfill its security commitments.*

... The Assad regime, under increasing pressure by the Syrian opposition, could feel empowered to carry out even more devastating chemical weapons attacks without a response ... *A refusal to act would undermine the*

8 For several other videos of speeches and statements by senior administration officials and congressional leaders, see White House n.d.

credibility of America's other security commitments – including the President's commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The word of the United States must mean something. It is vital currency in foreign relations and international and allied commitments.[9]

Perhaps the most explicit case for the importance of US credibility and resolve came from Secretary of State John Kerry when he outlined the consequences of simply backing away from the now-reinforced coercive threats issued by the president:

> *It matters deeply to the credibility and the future interests of the United States of America and our allies. It matters because a lot of other countries, whose policies challenges* [sic] *these international norms, are watching. They are watching. They want to see whether the United States and our friends mean what we say. It is directly related to our credibility and whether countries still believe the United States when it says something. They are watching to see if Syria can get away with it, because then maybe they too can put the world at greater risk.* And make no mistake, in an increasingly complicated world of sectarian and religious extremist violence, what we choose to do or not do matters in real ways to our own security.
>
> ... It matters because if we choose to live in the world where a thug and a murderer like Bashar al-Assad can gas thousands of his own people with impunity, even after the United States and our allies said no, and then the world does nothing about it, *there will be no end to the test of our resolve and the dangers that will flow from those others who believe that they can do as they will. This matters also beyond the limits of Syria's borders. It is about whether Iran, which itself has been a victim of chemical weapons attacks, will now feel emboldened, in the absence of action, to obtain nuclear weapons. It is about Hezbollah, and North Korea, and every other terrorist group or dictator that might ever again contemplate the use of weapons of mass destruction.* (emphasis added)[10]

The president also received considerable support from House Speaker John Boehner, who applied the same logic to forcefully defend

9 Hagel 2013.
10 United States Department of State 2013a.

action against the Syrian regime in light of serious concerns about the costs of losing US credibility:

> The use of these weapons has to be responded to and only the United States has the capability and the capacity to stop Assad and *to warn others around the world that this type of behavior is not going to be tolerated* … We have enemies around the world that need to understand that we're not going to tolerate this type of behavior. We also have allies around the world and allies in the region who also need to know that America will be there and stand up whether [*sic*] it is necessary. (emphasis added)[11]

Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, as well as former senators Joe Lieberman and Jon Kyl, all concurred with this view. As McCain explained,

> Now that a resolution is going to be before the Congress of the United States, we want to work to make that resolution something that majorities of the members of both houses could support … A rejection of that, a vote against the resolution by Congress, I think would be catastrophic, *because it would undermine the credibility of the United States of America and of the President of the United States. None of us want that.*[12]

McCain went even further, suggesting that the administration should move beyond limited air strikes and develop a more comprehensive strategy aimed, ultimately, at regime change: "What we do want is an articulation of a goal that over time to degrade [*sic*] Bashar Assad's capabilities, increase and upgrade the capabilities of the Free Syrian Army and the Free Syrian government so they can reverse the momentum on the battlefield." This view was shared by others who similarly "fear[ed] that the limited airstrikes the White House appears inclined to pursue … have not yet been tied to a broader strategy, even though President Obama has said that Assad must go."[13] For some, in other words, even more robust action was warranted in order to preserve and enhance American credibility by signaling that crossing

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11 Halper 2013.

12 Miller 2013. Also, see McCain and Graham 2014. McCain and Graham criticize the president for his policy on Syria and its effects on US credibility.

13 Lieberman and Kyl 2013.

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