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The U.S. must stand behind its security obligations

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On the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, Gen. James Mattis admonished the 1st Marine Division to "[d]emonstrate to the world there is 'No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy.' " That motto could serve as a guiding principle for sound national security policy. Regrettably, our allies wonder whether the United States is demonstrating the reverse.

Since leaving as secretary of homeland security in January 2009, I have talked with officials from friendly nations in Asia and the Middle East. Increasingly, I hear skepticism about whether the United States remains a reliable ally our friends can trust for support against attacks. These private conversations echo public statements by leaders in the Persian Gulf states and Asia expressing concern that they may have to fend for themselves in the face of military challenges from Iran, China or North Korea.

The deterrent value of alliances and treaties depends on convincing potential adversaries that we will respond to aggression against our partners as firmly as if aggression were directed against ourselves. Establishing that as a credible warning means being measured in what we say and matching our deeds to our words. Often, we have done neither.

U.S. intervention in Libya was prompted not by an alliance or treaty commitment but by a humanitarian impulse. Our insistence on multilateral action was sensible, but the characterization of this as "leading from behind" unfortunately implied that we were trying to hide behind our allies. This echoed the perception that U.S. security policy prioritized exiting Iraq and Afghanistan and avoiding all but surgical military action in the future.

More serious is the perception that the U.S. approach to Syria has been a combination of bluster and retreat. In August 2011, President Obama said that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside." We invested little in aid or support to effect this. One year later, the president articulated his red line on Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons. Rightly or wrongly, he did so without obtaining a promise of congressional backing. But when proof of that use became unmistakable, the president abruptly decided that he should seek legislative approval. And when that became chancy, he seized upon a Russian "off ramp" that has succeeded in entrenching Assad's status and, according to the March update from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, has not come close to eliminating Syria's chemical weapons or weapons capability.

One Asian official with whom I spoke this year expressly pointed to Syria as a reason to doubt U.S. willingness to stand with allies against an increasingly assertive China. Interestingly, he also cited the recent memoir by former defense secretary Robert Gates to question whether U.S. aversion to conflict means shaky commitments in what is an increasingly risky region. Even at home, 70 percent of Americans believe the United States is less respected than in the past, according to a December poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press .

Not surprisingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to have read our passivity as a license to pursue control, if not conquest, of his neighbors. He has effectively repudiated the 1994 Budapest memorandum on security assurances in which Ukraine agreed to give up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for commitments from the United States, Britain and Russia to ensure its political independence and territorial sovereignty. U.S. disregard for those security assurances, which were renewed in 2009, suggests that Russia may regard them as empty promises.

Of course, diminished U.S. credibility is a result of more than administration policy. Some neo-isolationist Republican lawmakers and advocacy groups have repeatedly disparaged the value of standing with our allies or been dismissive of aggression on the other side of the globe. They have supported budget cuts that seriously diminish U.S. military capabilities and contradict our promises of support for allies.

Make no mistake: A world that doubts whether the United States will stand with its allies is a much more dangerous world. If nations in the Middle East and Asia believe that we are irresolute in our security commitments, they will make their own arrangements. The risk of miscalculation leading to conflict will increase. Some nations will take the lesson that securing themselves requires obtaining nuclear capability. And when countries believe our red lines are revocable or mere bluffs, the danger that they will provoke a war increases, as did Saddam Hussein's misreading of U.S. intentions in 1990, which led to the invasion of Kuwait.

A strategy reset requires that we define and articulate real red lines, that we maintain the soft and hard power to enforce those red lines and that when red lines are crossed, we respond with strong economic action, military assistance or even military action. A clearly articulated alliance strategy backed with resolute action is the only way to restore lasting stability that promotes security at home and around the globe.

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