

The game nations play

The game of chicken helps explain the outcomes of international confrontations. In the standard game, before it is applied to international relations, two cars race toward each other. The winner drives straight and is considered macho. The loser veers to avoid an accident and is considered a wimp. Of course, if they both drive straight, they crash and both drivers die. In this game, both drivers try to brag that they will drive straight. But their proclamations are meaningless. Each driver will veer if he believes the other driver will go straight. Why? Because neither driver wants to die.

If one driver can convince the other driver that he will drive straight, no matter what, that

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always driving straight, based on past games.

In international confrontations, the two adversaries make threats, but these threats are only believable if the players have followed through on their threats in the past. If neither nation backs down, the result is a war – this is international relations' version of the car

player will win the game because the other driver will turn to avoid a collision. How does a driver become convincing? He can be considered crazy enough to drive straight. Or, he can gain a reputation of

crash in the game of chicken.

Unfortunately, the U.S. has developed a reputation for making threats and then backing down. President Obama warned that if Syria used chemical weapons against its citizens, a red line would be crossed, and the United States would forcefully respond. Syria ignored this threat. It used its chemical weapons, and the United States did nothing. This reduced our credibility when facing adversaries in the future.

One could argue that Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan was an example of the U.S. playing the wimp strategy and backing out of previous commitments. This allowed the Taliban to assume control over the country. It also less-

ened Putin's confidence that the U.S. would strongly back Ukraine after Russia invaded it. And as we saw, Putin did invade Ukraine.

Trump's waffling on trade policy, by imposing tariffs and then by quickly suspending them, has served to reduce his credibility in future confrontations. As these examples illustrate, across several presidents, the U.S. has been losing credibility, making it harder for the U.S. to win the game of chicken in international relations.

Recently, Donald Trump seems to have taken a step to enhance the U.S.'s reputation for making credible threats. Trump gave Iran 60 days to negotiate a treaty to limit Iran's ability to enrich uranium. On day 61, no agreement had been

reached and Israel bombed the Iranian nuclear facilities (and other military targets). Israel's attack, by occurring right after Trump's deadline passed, allows Trump to make future threats with more credibility. This will make U.S. adversaries more likely to back down in the face of U.S. threats.

Trump would be well served to only make threats that he plans to follow through on. This will help him in future confrontations by building his credibility. Of course, it goes without saying, it is important that the threats are well thought out and reasonable responses in the conflict in question.

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