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The Two Amigos and the Middle East

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Lindsey Graham and John McCain, the two-thirds of the Three Amigos who are still in the U.S. Senate since the departure of Joe Lieberman, contributed to the opinion pages of the *Washington Post* this weekend a short reprise [4] of their familiar positions on front-burner Middle Eastern issues: act forcefully to defeat the Assad regime in Syria, be obdurate toward Iran, etc. Nothing new here, but it might be worth reflecting for a moment on one of their accusations: that the administration's “failure in Syria” is part of broader “collapse of U.S. credibility in the Middle East.” Graham and McCain's particular usage of the term *credibility* exemplifies something

broadly, too: a habit of associating the concept only with forceful actions, especially military actions, rather than with any other policy course.

This restrictive concept of upholding a nation's credibility does not flow from any dictionary definition of credibility ("the quality or power of inspiring belief"). Whether any given action or piece of inaction tends to inspire belief depends of course on context and on what else the state in question has said or done on the same subject. There is no reason to postulate an asymmetry in favor of forceful action or any other kind of action.

There are valid grounds for criticizing the Obama administration's policies on Syria, especially the overemphasis on the issue of chemical weapons with insufficient advance thinking about what to do if a significant chemical incident were to occur. But the administration's subsequent seizing on the Russian initiative after the chemical incident in August was in a real sense a making good on its own word about viewing chemical weapons as the most important dimension of the Syrian conflict. That is an unjustifiably narrow way of viewing the conflict, but at least the administration was being consistent, and consistency is an important ingredient of credibility.

The Two Amigos write that the president "specifically committed" to them in the Oval Office "to degrade the Assad regime's military capabilities, upgrade the capabilities of the moderate opposition and shift the momentum on the battlefield." Those of us who have not been flies on the Oval Office wall cannot referee that one. But publicly the president has not made the sort of commitment that would warrant the Amigos' accusation that he "abandoned" the Syrian opposition.

Another erroneous application of the concept of credibility is the senators' equating loss of credibility with how "Israel and our Gulf Arab partners are losing all confidence" in the administration's diplomacy, with references to recent indications of the Saudi regime's displeasure. Displeasing other states, when there has been no failure to live up to a treaty commitment and when the other states—as is true of both Israel and Saudi Arabia—have major differences of interest with the United States as well as some shared interests, has nothing to do with a failure of credibility. Consistent pursuit of the United States's own interests is much more of a foundation for maintaining credibility.

Graham and McCain do inadvertently give us an example in their piece of how U.S. credibility can be hurt. In referring to the Iranian nuclear issue they say, "We should be prepared to suspend the implementation of new sanctions, but only if Iran suspends its enrichment activities." This formulation comes out of a letter [5] that eight other senators also signed and that tries to portray this package as a balanced "suspension for suspension" deal. This is a ludicrous play on words. There is nothing reasonable or proportionate about linking a demand for one side to stop completely an ongoing program in return for the other side not piling on still more new sanctions, which doesn't really entail a suspension of anything. The wordplay is unbelievable. If we want the Iranians or anyone else to believe that the United States is serious about reaching an agreement, this sort of silliness damages U.S. credibility.