

# Hints, Bluffs and Uncertainty

by George Friedman - October 31, 2023

The practice of foreign policy, like many other practices, consists of hints and bluffs amid uncertainty. There's value in making the worthless seem invaluable and the baffling appear to be self-evident. And yet there were several events in the past week that signal things that I, at least, can't quite fathom.

First, U.S. President Joe Biden is going to China to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping. I'm not sure what he expects to achieve and therefore unsure why he's going. But he's the president of the United States, and I'll allow that he must know something that makes him think the trip worthwhile. Still, China's foreign minister – the one who replaced the one who disappeared – said that the meeting will be contentious. Given that China's economy is fragile and that its military position was weakened by a U.S.-Philippines agreement earlier this year, China is signaling that the meeting will require American sincerity.

American sincerity is in short supply always but particularly when China is trying to bluff. China needs U.S. imports and investment, and more frankly, it needs the U.S. to have a weaker strategic position. Since that isn't going to happen anytime soon, the remaining option is to pretend that the U.S. is the one in need.

Meanwhile, an interesting statement was issued in Belarus, a place where interesting things rarely emerge. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that the war in Ukraine is at an end, and that neither Ukraine nor Russia has the ability to defeat the other. Each side must accept this reality, he said, and should negotiate an end to the conflict.

Recall that Lukashenko owes his position to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who intervened on his behalf after nationwide protests broke out over what was widely regarded as a sham election. Recall, too, that Lukashenko gave sanctuary to many in the Wagner Group after its failed insurrection, apparently with Putin's blessing. Put simply, Lukashenko is Putin's subordinate. So it's highly unlikely that he would have issued such a statement without first clearing it with Putin. And if Putin gave the go-ahead, it means Moscow may well be prepared to negotiate. Putin, of course, cannot admit as much because it would indicate weakness. If forced to admit weakness, post-war Russia would be left to the mercy of the West, especially the U.S. The paradox in foreign affairs is that the more you

need a deal, the less likely you are to get one.

Finally, Biden announced that the United States officially stands by Israel. Though this isn't a huge surprise, it still seems a massive commitment. But in reality, it's hard to know what it means. Israeli forces are trained for precisely the battle they are facing in Gaza. So, too, is Hamas. The U.S. has the largest and best-equipped military in the world, but because the armed forces could be deployed to the Arctic as easily as to the jungle, their training tends to be broader. A better way to put it is that U.S. forces are trained to be flexible. Israel is a small country surrounded by potential enemies, so its military is trained in much more specific ways, conditioned to respond to and defeat its attackers on certain terrain and in certain circumstances. To fight in Gaza, U.S. forces would have to be rapidly organized and armed for a fight Israeli forces have been focused on for a long time.

In other words, Israel does not need U.S. ground forces. Integrating them into the battle would delay Israeli action. Israel already has air superiority, as well as an ability, however imperfect, to take out incoming missiles. And U.S. has already committed to Israel billions of dollars for its defense over the years. American participation, then, may simply be a matter of vocal support for a long-time ally rather than an actual commitment to battle.

International affairs has a strange dishonesty in it. Mystery is an inherent vice. China can't simply define what it needs from the United States, so it pretends that it needs nothing. Washington can't simply tell China what it is prepared to do because doing so would signal that it knows China's needs. Putin can't say what has become common knowledge to everyone, so he had Lukashenko say it.

There are two reasons for these kinds of diplomatic dances. One is pride. Admitting need indicates weakness, and no one wants to be taken advantage of. But second and more important, admitting need reveals intentions, and all nations have a political need to hide their intentions. It's a cryptic business, yes, but when taken together, all these little signals create a mutual understanding because the complexities of truth and denial make it impossible to understand what is intended. And even when the intention is benign, the safest course is to construct a more threatening intention so as not to be trapped in another's scheme.

I do not argue that we should change our behavior or reform the practice of foreign affairs. The situation is what it is. I merely point out that humans are strange creatures engaging in strange games. This may seem obvious, but because wars are built on this process, it isn't trivial.

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