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Leveraging Leverage by David I. Steinberg

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"Give me a place to stand, and with a lever I will move the whole world." So said Archimedes, and today, over 2,000 years later, we attempt to move the world, or at least various parts of it, with what we call "leverage."

Leverage has become a most popular word and concept in the field of diplomacy, or at least in US diplomacy. For as a great military and economic power, the United States is supposed to have a long enough lever to move various parts of the world in directions that it desires. There are said to be at least three types of leverage used in international relations. The positive ones – to provide things the other party wants so as to reinforce mutual goals; the negative ones – to force some entity to suffer to achieve your ends; and normative leverage – to use your counterpart's or general norms and standards to get what one wants. The foreign aid program in some places has been used in the first instance; sanctions have been applied in the case of the second; and an appeal to international standards such as the universal declaration of human rights in the third case. So we can use our reputed economic might to provide sustenance to those we regard as benign, withdraw it or threaten our powerful military machine to provide negative reinforcement to achieve our goals, or take the moral high ground in other instances.

But, alas, we do not often seem to have that abstracted "place" on which to stand to move even small segments of the world, sometimes called countries. For we are not dealing with inanimate objects that can be shifted or manipulated at our whim. These entities have living interests – national, regional, personal – that interfere with this essentially mechanistic approach to policy. As we blatantly believe we can force acquiescence or unity, other states may quietly pursue their own agendas, undercutting our capacity for influence and ignoring our protestations or support. Our lever is rarely long enough to enforce compliance. When we are in unison with another state, the lever is not necessary.

There is a strong degree of hubris in the diplomatic concept of "leverage," but it has become so commonplace that we may miscalculate the degree to which this is insulting. The US is used to playing the power game, at least over the last hundred years, but whether it works to achieve our ends is questionable, and when on rare occasions we may achieve a short-range goal, it may prove ephemeral, for foreign interests move, evolve, and change in directions and at rates we cannot control.

The use of leverage, or at least the overt use of negative leverage, will normally provoke nationalistic responses that, in effect, reduce the length of our lever. For such responses to overt foreign pressures may be the requirement of the target's political legitimacy; this trumps most other considerations.

So in Myanmar, after years of a failed US sanctions policy that was until 2009 designed to enforce regime change, some argue that we need to keep some sanctions to maintain "leverage" over a civilianized regime that is obviously bent on reform. They have not worked in the past, but we are, in effect, saying that we do not trust the Burmese leaders or their peoples to have sufficient say in their own affairs, Big brother with a big lever is there to provide protection, for we know what is best for them. Bodyguards may be fine under certain circumstances but not in such cases.

Teddy Roosevelt did not quite say, "Speak softly but carry a big lever." Speaking softly in diplomatic terms is usually a very good idea, which is one the US rarely invokes, but one wonders whether in the present world the US has big enough levers to achieve our stated goals, or find the proper place on which to stand.

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