

# Woody Allen and America's Declining Power to Persuade

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“I forbid you! I forbid you to go! I’m forbidding it! Is that what you do when I forbid you? I’m not going to be forbidding you a lot.” This is not something [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on her recent trip to Pakistan](#) regarding efforts by the Pakistani government to combat terrorism, nor is it something she said to [Bibi Netanyahu regarding settlements in the West Bank](#) during her recent trip to Israel, but it might have been.

This line, which Larry Lipton (Woody Allen) said to his wife Carol (Diane Keaton) in Woody Allen’s 1993 movie *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, captures something about U.S. foreign policy in recent years, and not just during the Obama administration. The Bush administration similarly urged Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to crack down on terrorism to little avail; and in a different context urged Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili not to initiate any conflict with Russia, with equal success.

The ability to persuade foreign leaders, particularly those who are allies, to support the U.S., both in big issues such as the war in Iraq, and more specific issues such as combating terrorism in one place or not initiating conflict, is a key piece of U.S. foreign policy. The ability to persuade rests on the critical assumption that there are benefits to helping the U.S. and costs to not doing that. These costs and benefits, however, need to be moderate in nature. A foreign policy that, for example, sought to cut off all assistance to countries that did not support the U.S. on everything would be bullying and ineffective. Similarly, it is essential to recognize that sometimes allies will have legitimate interests that differ from those of the U.S.

Increasingly, however, the U.S. has trouble convincing allies to do things that they have stated they want to do, or have agreed to try to do. This is a different kind of problem and reflects some of the new realities of the post-post Cold War period. The persuasive power of the U.S. has declined as other countries, even those that are at least somewhat dependent on the U.S. for their security, realize that not doing what the U.S. asks will result in, to paraphrase Woody Allen, not being asked to do much by the U.S., but that is about it. This problem is exacerbated when the desires of the U.S., as frequently happens, conflict with either domestic political pressure or state capacity.

The U.S. is not only no longer the hyper-power it was a decade ago, but because of economic realities which have effected almost all countries, has less of an ability to project power and get its way generally. Developing new tools to help ensure that our allies, or even clients, do what they have agreed to do seems like it should be an easy thing, but is has proven more difficult. The question of what to do about uncooperative

clients is not a new one, but it is increasingly important-and vexing. It is clear, however, that simply forbidding or urging, is not enough anymore.