

4-12-2002

Trends. The Psychology of Treaty Compliance

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2002) "Trends. The Psychology of Treaty Compliance," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 14 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol12/iss14/6>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Trends. The Psychology of Treaty Compliance

Author: Editor

Volume: 12

Issue: 14

Date: 2002-04-12

Keywords: Russia, Treaties, United States

What does it mean to be committed to a pledge or promise? How can one infer this in others? Such questions become germane in considering the recent United States (US) State Department cable transmitted to Russia and stipulating that the US has not been able to certify Russian commitment to treaties banning chemical and biological weapons.

One problem with certification of commitment is that any political entity must be flexible in its relationship with any treaty. As political conditions change, tendencies toward compliance should change as well. Total commitment regardless of real-world change seems to be a prescription for disaster and one's demise.

As tendencies towards compliance change, a signatory or ratifier may vary in overtly communicating the need for changing or abrogating the treaty versus covertly establishing deceptive practices to mask past, present, or future treaty violations.

Another problem comprises commitment as a political issue that may serve as a political vehicle having little intended bearing on compliance practices. For example, raising concerns about commitment may "really" be about reinforcing isolationism, Russophobia, the lack of worth of treaties in general, and the like. Interestingly, commitment as a political vehicle may then have significant direct bearing on compliance, as it may create psychological conditions for noncompliance or for more intensive compliance among treaty participants depending on phenomena such as reactance, anger, fear, catharsis, demand characteristics, cognitive dissonance, and various perceptions of instrumental value.

Weapons of mass destruction merit a commitment to very careful policy analysis. Yet such a commitment can't be above politics because politics is its very essence. (See Begue, L. (2002). Beliefs in justice and faith in people: Just world, religiosity, and interpersonal trust. *Personality & Individual Differences*, 32, 375-382; Blackstock, M.D. (2001). Where is the trust? Using trust-based mediation for First Nations Dispute in Canada. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 19, 9-30; Cohen-Charash, Y., & Spector, P. E. (2001). The role of justice in organizations: A meta-analysis. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 86, 278-321; Miller, J. (April 8, 2002). U.S. warns Russia of need to verify treaty compliance. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A6.) (Keywords: Russia, Treaties, United States.)