

Assessing Engagement: Strategy, Tactics, and Content

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2009 Weinberg Founders Conference

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On October 18, 2009, John Hannah and Amb. Ronald Neumann addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on U.S. Middle East strategy. A senior foreign policy practitioner in both Republican and Democratic administrations, he served most recently as national security advisor to former vice president Richard Cheney. Ronald Neumann is president of the American Academy of Diplomacy and a former U.S. ambassador to Algeria, Bahrain, and Afghanistan.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

John Hannah

Thus far, the Obama administration has placed diplomatic engagement at the forefront of America's relations with its adversaries. This strategy is aimed at convincing these adversaries that a genuine alternative path is available to them, assuming they are willing to change their behavior on matters of critical concern to Washington. As the president has repeatedly stated, this path can lead to new relations with the United States based on mutual respect and mutual interests.

The Obama administration's strategic shift was heavily influenced by its negative assessment of Bush-era policies. According to this critique, Washington's approach had been too confrontational, antagonizing adversaries and allies alike while failing to achieve U.S. objectives. Whether accurate or not, this widespread narrative had a significant effect on the Obama administration's conception and pursuit of engagement.

With respect to Iran, the shift has meant offering an open hand rather than a closed fist. Instead of threatening isolation, punitive actions, and possible military attack, the administration has repeatedly sought to reassure the Islamic Republic of America's benign intentions and desire to engage in direct negotiations as soon as possible. At the same time, high-level U.S. officials have publicly cast doubt on the viability of a military option, objecting to potential Israeli military action in particular.

By design, this concept of engagement requires 100 percent U.S. effort even if there is only a 10 percent chance of success -- as may be the case in negotiations over contentious issues such as Iran's nuclear activity. Specifically, Washington must demonstrate to Iran and the rest of the world that it is absolutely committed to achieving peaceful, diplomatic solutions. In the administration's view, this policy kills two birds with

one stone: it gives Iran no excuse to avoid serious negotiations, and it gives America's more reticent international partners no reason to question Washington's good faith or avoid taking on their own required responsibilities.

During President Obama's first six months in office, the results of this "open hand" approach were far from encouraging. It produced practically nothing from Iran, and it seemed to shape the administration's rather reluctant reaction to the remarkable developments that unfolded in Iran after June 12. These events -- the first serious internal threat to the Islamic Republic in thirty years -- were initially viewed as more of a complication for the administration's engagement strategy than an opportunity.

By midsummer, however, Washington appeared to realize that the "soft" approach of engagement was not producing the desired results. That realization -- combined with a growing sense of urgency from Israel in particular that the diplomatic clock may be running out -- was crucial in two respects. First, it seemed to spur the administration into adding elements of pressure to its approach and, second, it may have helped bring Iran to the table in Geneva. This is a hopeful sign -- perhaps the administration has recognized the primary lesson of its first nine months of engagement, namely, that pressure works.

At the same time, the president must not overlook engagement's potential impact on domestic political dynamics in Iran, especially after June 12. Whether the October negotiations in Geneva were a net gain or loss for U.S. interests, the embattled Iranian regime clearly achieved a degree of legitimacy and stature when it sat down as an equal with the United States and other world powers. Geneva also shifted the global spotlight away from the severe problems the Islamic Republic was experiencing on its own streets, and onto the high politics of what was being discussed in the negotiating room.

Ronald Neumann

In general, engagement is just one tool among many in the diplomat's arsenal. The choice of which particular tool to use in a given situation should be guided not by ideology, but rather by the underlying policy objective. Yet the United States too often views diplomatic relations in more simplistic terms: as a reward for a country's good behavior, and as something to take away if a country is misbehaving. This creates a double challenge for policymakers -- it endangers Washington's ability to inform and influence while raising the political cost of reengagement once relations have been cut off. Moreover, by requiring target countries to meet preconditions for reengagement, the United States is essentially demanding concessions before negotiations even begin. Conspicuously, there are no examples in the past two decades of diplomatic history where isolation has led to a breakthrough in the Middle East.

Engagement need not be viewed as surrender, however. Other diplomatic tools, including pressure, can be judiciously combined with engagement to secure U.S. policy objectives. The notion that one must choose between negotiations and the use of force is therefore a false dichotomy. Remaining engaged even at the most difficult moments can give Washington options and information it might not otherwise have.

Iran is a case in point. Washington's thirty-year absence from that country has contributed to profound knowledge gaps regarding cultural differences and diplomatic modalities. As a result, the United States has lost much of its ability to understand and influence Iran. Today, Washington has a broad range of concerns related to Tehran, from

Afghanistan and Iraq to the nuclear issue and Hizballah. Without direct engagement, it is difficult to see how the United States can manage the most contentious of these issues, let alone those on which it might share interests with Iran.

To be sure, engagement should not be viewed as an end in itself -- it must be defined by clear objectives, even if these are not publicly shared. In general, however, it is difficult to envision a scenario in which contact with another government would not afford some benefits to the United States.

As for whether engagement will actually succeed with countries such as Iran, Syria, and North Korea, it is still too early to judge. The Obama administration has the idea of engagement, but does it understand that engagement is not an alternative to pressure, but rather one tool among many? Moreover, can it curtail its tendency to talk too much about these issues and do things too publicly? This tendency creates undue risk for U.S. policy -- words that are not backed up by actions can undermine credibility, creating the impression of weakness in the Arab world and beyond.

In particular, the administration should be wary of speaking out in support of Iran's Green Movement, the nascent but widespread opposition faction. Assessing, let alone understanding, what is happening inside Iran remains inordinately difficult, and linking nuclear negotiations to domestic developments is risky at best. Washington's prospects for success hinge on convincing the Islamic Republic that the United States does not seek regime change -- emphasizing support for the Green Movement or even human rights in general could create the opposite impression. The administration should therefore look for ways to push Iran into putting more on the table without provoking the regime's existential fears.