

When Multilateralism Met Realism -- and Tried to Make an Iran Deal

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If realist opponents of the Iran agreement insist that the JCPOA must go, they will need to explain in detail how the limited alternatives at Washington's disposal are worth the profound risks of killing the current deal.

President Barack Obama's Aug. 6 speech on Iran, notable for its "my way or war" polemics, signals a hardening of the debate over the Iran nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, just as Congress begins reviewing the deal. This political calcification reflects various factors, from presidential election polling, to tensions between the Obama administration and Congress, to the existential issues involved for Middle Eastern states. But it draws much of its fire from the unreconciled differences in competing world views of the many fors and contras -- a multilateral idealism for the former, a unilateral realism for the latter.

Both perspectives are valid, but neither is complete. Without understanding the differences in perspectives and attempting to bridge them, arriving at a rational decision will be hampered. Even more seriously, the ultimate up or down results -- JCPOA survives congressional review or doesn't; the JCPOA, or whatever would replace it, strengthens Middle East stability or doesn't -- will be crippled if the deal does not better reflect and reconcile these conflicting world views. Thus Obama's multilateral idealism needs a shot of unilateral realism, and the realist opposition needs to better appreciate what multilateral idealism can and can't do.

These two perspectives have a long history of conflict and cohabitation. The P5+1 effort with Iran on the nuclear issue is a case of classic multilateral idealism: global relationships as moral, ordered, rational, and based on the rule of law. The operating elements of this system are nation states, equally sovereign and committed to the UN preamble's values, for which they signed up. The coin of this realm is diplomatic politesse even among bitter enemies, with member states treated as inherently redeemable -- if they promise to mend their ways.

This approach presents problems when dealing with a revolutionary anti-status quo state like Iran, problems

exacerbated by the Obama administration's multilateral idealism on steroids. Projecting their own views onto a very different culture, administration leaders have claimed that the opportunities the deal offers Iran, as the president noted in his July 14 statement, for "integration into the global economy, more engagement with the international community, and the ability of the Iranian people to prosper and thrive" will do far more than any JCPOA details to keep Iran nuclear weapons-free. Iran's past behavior is thus not particularly important. What is, is "going forward," as Secretary of State John Kerry put it at the State Department press briefing on June 16. The administration thus seemingly believes that Iran will adhere to the agreement because adherence is beneficial to Iran's inevitable "vocation" -- a normal system state.

Usually presidents operating in a multilateral idealism context season it with a bit of realism (see: Former President Richard Nixon's 1972 Vietnam escalation while negotiating with China and the USSR) -- especially with nuclear aspirant states where the negotiating record is not promising. But the Obama administration is hampered here from two directions: first, by its dismissive attitude towards military force (the ultimate realist seasoning) in circumstances other than counterterrorism, and second, by administration leaders' "grand ambitions for a deal they hope could open up relations with [Iran] and be part of a transformation in the Middle East," as Gardiner Harris put it in the *New York Times*. This supposedly, per Kerry's words to the *Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg in an interview on Aug. 5, could even produce U.S.-Iranian joint action on regional problems. In line with this, the administration seems to see any tough love towards Iran as deleterious to the prize -- which is a different Iran. But given the discouraging record of transforming states (Iraq, Afghanistan, China, Russia), putting all of one's eggs in this basket of idealist transformation seriously harms chances for managing an unpredictable Iran.

But those sharing the stark unilateral realism perspective of many JCPOA opponents have their own difficulties. In dealing with security threats like Iran, realism has much to offer: Only power and force, not laws or trust or glitzy conferences in Alpine venues, can protect oneself and one's friends from the "other." But driven by moral repugnance at Iran's undoubtedly aggressive policies, many opponents seek not effective deterrence but something stronger -- a permanent state of hostility toward Iran that mirrors Tehran's approach toward much of the world. While critics of the agreement frequently cite the many flaws in the JCPOA, for many the deal's main problem is its failure to force Iran to surrender virtually its entire nuclear program and remain permanently and internationally ostracized as the aggressor state they argue it is. The problem with this approach is not the end, per se, but the means available to achieve it.

Unilateral realism, of course, has in its repertoire the means to this end -- military force. (Unilateral U.S. sanctions just don't cut it.) But this is not now an option. Public opinion following the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is strongly against an attack on Iran in almost all circumstances, and as Gen. Joseph Dunford recently noted, America has more dangerous threats than Iran. Thus, the United States -- starting with the Bush administration -- eschewed a unilateral military approach with Iran for an international mix of negotiation and sanctions backed by threat of force, essentially applying multilateral idealism with unilateral realism threads, and that's where we are today.

With no unilateral realism means -- military force or unilateral sanctions -- at hand to achieve their desired end, realist opponents must deploy multilateral idealism's means: thus, their calls for new international negotiations and sanctions to rectify the JCPOA error. But these means, whether in the P5+1 talks or in any successor negotiation with Tehran (were the JCPOA to be rejected), cannot produce the end which these opponents seek; permanent ostracism is alien to the entire international law-based system. Not even Saddam Hussein's idiotic defiance at a time of much greater U.S. dominance could generate perpetual outcast status.

Thus the problem with the unilateral realism approach. Despite Obama's accusations, opponents wisely avoid advocating the one means -- military force -- that would produce the victory over Iran they want. The irony is that the uncertain maximum end which they could obtain with the multilateral idealism means left to them -- replacing

the JCPOA with a new multilateral negotiation backed by new international sanctions -- is simply limited improvements to the JCPOA. And this approach has major risks: 1) no guarantee of a new, let alone better, agreement; 2) diplomatic confusion; 3) a refusal by the Obama administration to reengage; 4) the likely erosion of sanctions; 5) the collapse, at least temporarily, of verification of Iran's nuclear program; and 6) the possible exploitation of America's credibility gap by Russia and China.

If realist opponents have no choice to enlist these tools of multilateral idealism as a means to deal with Iran after killing the JCPOA, they need to analyze the practical pros and cons of the outcome in advance. What is the benefit of a new, still-less-than satisfactory, multilateral agreement in comparison to the profound risks of killing the existing agreement? A magic victory over Iran without using force is just not possible. And if the opponents of the deal still insist the JCPOA must go, they should present their alternative multilateral diplomatic, sanctions, and military plans in detail -- including hard evidence that the rest of the P5+1 would accommodate them.

Likewise, if the Obama administration wants to secure the agreement from congressional defeat and ensure that it meets minimum American and partner security needs (and thus not be rejected by the next administration), it must introduce a more credible element of unilateral realism -- namely, the threat of military pressure so abhorred by this president -- into its Iran policy, and distance itself credibly from the dream of a future Iran transformed by Obama and Kerry's diplomatic skill.

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