

Engagement or Consequences:

Getting the Iran Message Right

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Brief Analysis

A number of top U.S. national security officials are visiting Israel this week, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates and National Security Advisor Gen. James Jones, and Iran will surely be at the top of their agenda. With Iran making steady progress toward nuclear weapons capability and remaining silent on the U.S. offer to negotiate, and with the possibility of an Israeli strike on Iran looming ever closer, U.S. officials' public message on the consequences for Iran should engagement fail will draw close scrutiny. Although the Obama administration appears to understand the need for serious consequences, its public messaging on this point has been uneven, blunting its effectiveness.

Background

The Obama administration has continued to stress its preference for dialogue as a means to resolve the nuclear confrontation with Iran, but more recently it has emphasized that Iran has limited time left to embrace U.S. outreach. In his May 18 press conference with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu at the White House, President Obama, while dismissing the idea of "an artificial deadline," said that he "should have a fairly good sense by the end of the year" of whether engagement was succeeding. Following Iran's disputed presidential elections, Obama, at the G8 summit, advanced the date on which this stocktaking would be made to September 24, the start of the G20 summit. The president's senior officials have suggested that if productive dialogue did not materialize, the United States would seek "crippling" or "nonincremental" sanctions. The Obama administration views the effort to engage as vital to any subsequent effort to garner support for sanctions and has suggested that even Israel is "prepared to let [engagement] go forward." In a May 16 interview with Newsweek, Obama commented that "the fact that we have tried [to engage] will strengthen our position in mobilizing the international community, and Iran will have isolated itself." Senior U.S. officials, however, have declined to spell out precisely what sanctions Washington has in mind, thus detracting from the warnings.

Although readily warning about the prospect of sanctions, U.S. officials have offered a mixed message regarding preventive military action against Iran. When asked by Newsweek whether military action was "off the table," President Obama responded that "I don't take any options off the table with respect to Iran." Similarly, when Vice

President Joseph Biden told an interviewer that "We cannot dictate to another sovereign nation what they can and cannot do when they make a determination, if they make a determination, that they are existentially threatened," it was interpreted as a green light for an Israeli strike on Iran.

Other comments by senior officials, however, have appeared to essentially rule out U.S. or Israeli military action. Biden, in an earlier interview, said that Netanyahu would be "ill advised" to order a strike on Iran. Gates described the consequences of such action as "completely unpredictable, and likely very bad"; he suggested that a strike would only "delay the Iranian program for some period of time" while it would "unify [Iran] . . . cement their determination to have a nuclear program, and also build into the whole country an undying hatred of whoever hits them." Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen said on July 5 that he was concerned about "any strike on Iran," which he feared would be "very destabilizing not just in and of itself but [also because of] the unintended consequences of a strike like that." On July 7, in walking back Biden's perceived green light to Israel two days earlier, Obama told CNN that "We have said directly to the Israelis that it is important to try and resolve this in an international setting in a way that does not create major conflict in the Middle East." The U.S.-Israel divergence on military action against Iran was on full display during the July 27 Robert Gates - Ehud Barak press conference, at which Barak stressed repeatedly that the "military option" against Iran must remain open, while Gates was silent on the issue. In a revealing remark, Barak further noted, "We recommend to others to take the same position, but we cannot dictate to anyone."

Adding to the uncertainty over the Obama administration's commitment to consequences for Iran have been comments suggesting a defensive U.S. posture. On July 22, for example, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the United States would extend a "defense umbrella" over its Middle East allies if Iran acquired a nuclear weapon, a statement that drew comparisons to Soviet-era "containment" doctrine and accusations of acquiescence to a nuclear Iran. This statement drew immediate criticism from the Israeli government and led a senior White House official to tell the New York Times that Secretary Clinton was "speaking for herself" and British ambassador Nigel Sheinwald to insist that Clinton's remarks "should not be read as acceptance of an Iranian nuclear weapon." In subsequent statements, however, both Clinton and Gates continued to refer to a "defense umbrella." Perhaps adding to the uncertainty have been frequent U.S. appeals to Iran's own security interests. Secretary Clinton on May 20 told the Senate Appropriations Committee that the U.S. "goal is to persuade the Iranian regime that they will actually be less secure if they proceed with their nuclear weapons program." This echoed comments by Secretary Gates, who on April 30 told the same committee that nuclear weapons "actually badly served" Iran's interests, and by President Obama himself, who in his press conference with Netanyahu said that a nuclear arms race in the Middle East "would be extraordinarily dangerous for all concerned, including for Iran."

Conclusions

Although the Obama administration appears to understand the need for serious consequences should Iran refuse its offer of engagement, its scattered public messaging has created uncertainty about the extent of its commitment to such consequences. This tension between the underlying policy and the public message likely stems from the diverse audiences that the Obama administration must address. While it seeks to reassure Israel, other allies, and the American people that it will not sit idly if Iran rebuffs U.S. outreach, the administration simultaneously seeks to reassure Iran and fence-sitters such as Russia and China that its offer to engage is genuine and not merely a pretext for future pressure. The administration faces a difficult if not untenable task in attempting to fully reassure both audiences. Fairly or not, the more relaxed they perceive the United States to be about the threat from Iran, the more nervous Israel and other U.S. allies in the region become.

As a result, Washington needs to be more disciplined in its public message about consequences for Iran if engagement fails. At a minimum, U.S. officials should coordinate their messages internally, preview them with key

allies, and deliver them consistently. Where policy differences exist, they should be addressed up front and privately when possible, rather than aired publicly. This will help minimize counterproductive public backtracking and the appearance of fissures between the United States and its allies, which Iran will leap to exploit.

While this sort of message discipline is necessary, it may not be sufficient to drive home the point about serious consequences awaiting Iran. The strategic logic behind the Obama administration's threat of sanctions is presumably to induce the Iranian regime to weigh the potential benefits of engagement against the cost of refusing talks and incurring penalties. Brandishing sanctions while appearing to rule out military action, however, may reduce the credibility of the sanctions threat and even suggest that the United States is only willing to go so far in the use of pressure. This risks emboldening the Iranian regime to maintain its confrontational stance rather than to engage. With Iran continuing to rebuff offers to negotiate, and power increasingly resting in the hands of hardliners associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the United States should seek opportunities to remind the world of President Obama's May 16 statement that no option is off the table with respect to Iran. Ultimately, invoking the threat of a military conflict may end up being the key to avoiding one.

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