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Dialogue-First Diplomacy Not Working

Juan Zarate: Global Crises In Iran And North Korea Expose Weakness Of Obama's Outreach



Iran and North Korea have tested President Obama's global diplomacy agenda. (AP)

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The evolving crises in Iran and North Korea have now outpaced President Obama's diplomatic outreach. The prospect that direct dialogue with the regimes in Tehran and Pyongyang in the first instance could change their behavior has evaporated.

The Administration should now pivot to gain leverage against both regimes - whose primary interest is retaining a firm grip on power and whose own actions are leading to

their further international isolation. This requires a shift in strategy and a clear-eyed view that dialogue without leverage cannot be successful.

The Obama Administration came into power with a policy to recast the international perception of American power and to offer direct dialogue with those willing to negotiate, including with rogue regimes. The problem is that events in North Korea and Iran have already outpaced this strategy, and continued devotion to the "dialogue-first" principle amidst changing circumstances has consequences. It may have slowed the Administration's willingness to respond in each case and may be impeding our ability to take full advantage of emerging opportunities to build leverage - along with our international partners - against both Iran and North Korea.

Chances of the open-hand producing results with Pyongyang faded with the North's blatant bellicosity. Though President Obama said the North's missile tests in April should be met with real consequences, there was no response of import. It was not until the series of U.N. sanctions violations - to include the nuclear test in May - and the harsh sentencing of two American journalists that the Administration pushed for the types of sanctions that might hurt the North Korean regime: cargo inspections and tighter financial sanctions.

In Iran, the regime answered the Administration's initial outreach with calls for American apologies and promises of further development of the nuclear program. This did not shift the Administration's policy,

and now the dynamics on the ground in Iran - with the regime cracking down on protesters and its legitimacy fundamentally threatened from within - have further complicated the prospects of talks with Tehran.

The President's initial caution to the electoral protests was a realistic hedge that the power structure with whom the United States would need to negotiate - led by Ayatollah Khamanei and President Ahmedinejad - would remain in firm control, with the electoral dispute as a side show. If the protests could lead to a shift in the regime's approach to the West, the Administration calculated that dynamic was best served by not becoming a central protagonist and giving the hardliners the American bogey-man argument to taint the movement.

These initial responses - or lack thereof - were based on the notion that the prospect of dialogue should be preserved in the first instance. Aside from potentially appearing feckless and unprincipled in the face of direct challenges to our interests, this approach fails to recognize that dialogue is merely a tactic and cannot succeed without leverage. Leverage comes in many forms and can be used to challenge and constrain these regime's activities or convince regime leadership - via talks or otherwise - to change their behavior in a way that behooves our interests.

We must have our eyes wide open, taking advantage of opportunities to build leverage while understanding that these regimes most value their hold on power. At a time of tension within both countries' leadership, this presents opportunities to exploit fissures to our advantage.

In the case of North Korea, the regime's recalcitrance and illicit behavior should be used to maximum effect to drive, along with Japan and South Korea, public and private sector efforts to stop the North's international commercial activity critical to the development of their weapons and nuclear program, their financing, and potential proliferation.

The Administration appears now to have formulated a more coherent policy to squeeze the North, with the Navy tracking and turning back the North Korean vessel, Kang Nam, and the Treasury beginning its financial isolation campaign by warning of North Korea's illicit financial behavior and sanctions evasion. We can do more with an international campaign to find and freeze leadership assets, which are used to buy loyalty, as a means of building further tension and suspicion within the leadership ranks.

Our approach to the changing dynamics on the ground in Tehran should find ways to sustain and empower the voices of opposition, as a vehicle to foment further dissent and the fractures within the regime. As noted by numerous commentators, this could take the form of enlisting the private sector and Web 2.0 technologies to connect the dissenters with each other and the world or a more aggressive international campaign of condemnation of the regime, taking advantage of European outrage as the

regime continues its efficiently quiet crackdown. Added to this could be a fresh financial pressure campaign against Iranian banks and companies, while focusing on restricting Iranian oil imports and trade-related insurance.

At the same time, the Administration should consider quiet outreach to more moderate elements of the clerical establishment and a sustained strategy of even more direct dialogue with the Iranian public. The recent announcement that the Iranian election and new government are illegitimate by the Association of Researchers and Teachers of Qum, an influential group of Shia clerics, reflects a clear crack in the religious and ruling establishment. In combination with President Obama's moral voice, such pressure and assistance could serve to weaken the hardliners in the regime and force a fundamental rethinking of the policies most antithetical to U.S. interests.

At a time of weak Iranian regime legitimacy, the Administration needs to be acutely sensitive to inadvertently conferring international legitimacy through direct dialogue.

It is with a strengthened hand and leverage that we are more likely to see dialogue bear fruit, even though there is no guarantee that any strategy will result in rational responses from either regime. Blind adherence to the prospects of dialogue without looking for opportunities to create leverage will lead to missed opportunities and a weakened U.S. position at any negotiating table. Events with North Korea and Iran are already making this lesson clear and outpacing the Administration's dialogue-first diplomacy.