

IMPLICATIONS OF AMERICA'S DUAL-TRAC APPROACH TO IRAN

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As America's war on terror increasingly focuses on Iraq, it also implicates Iran in ways that work to Iran's disadvantage. The Bush Administration has openly expressed its disillusionment with Iranian policy and adopted a more assertive approach than at any time in the last decade. While fully appreciative of the reform movement's achievements, it is disappointed that practical results, notwithstanding repeated signals of imminent change, have fallen far short of both American and popular Iranian expectations.

Even before President Khatami embarked on his second term in August 2001, the U.S. had extended the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act for another five years. In his January 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush explicitly included Iran in his "axis of evil." And in July, he attacked the "unelected people who are the real rulers of Iran" while acknowledging the popular Iranian urge for reform and vowing that as they move toward a future defined by greater freedom, Iranians will have "no better friend" than the U.S. Subsequent Iranian moves (e.g., handing over some Taliban fugitives to Saudi Arabia), though considered positive, were nevertheless viewed as wholly inadequate.

This forceful American stance has come as an unpleasant surprise to Iran's rulers, because it touches some very sensitive nerves. After five years in office, Khatami has overseen some significant changes. The reform movement's achievements include a penetrating public debate even on such delicate issues as religion and state, Islam and democracy, the rule of the jurisconsult, and attitudes toward the U.S. and even Israel. This open intellectual discourse, the impressive freedom of discussion, the vitality of the press, and lively debates in the Majlis are all unprecedented. Nevertheless, there has been no real shift in the domestic balance of forces or in policy on issues of greatest concern to the U.S. Although reformers hold most electoral offices and enjoy massive public support, every test confirms that the conservatives have so far retained effective control. Khatami has consistently backed away from any frontal confrontation. And on the question of relations with the U.S., lively public debate cannot obscure the fact that conservatives have blocked any real change in policy.

Although visceral anti-Americanism has become an important symbol of the revolution – almost an article of faith – for the wider public, and especially among the young, it is always mixed with an element of appreciation. And while conservatives compare the U.S. and Iran to the wolf and the lamb, between

which peaceful coexistence is impossible, reformists compare relations between the two states to those between the wolf (the U.S.) and the lion (Iran). That analogy justifies a dialogue between them, from a position of strength, in order to promote the national interest. In fact, Iran has benefited from important American “services.” In 1991, the U.S. broke the power of Iraq, Iran’s enemy to the west. And in 2002, the U.S. destroyed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Iran’s enemy to the east. But if Iran thought that it could simply stand by as its objectives were promoted by the United States while continuing to pursue policies that ran counter to American objectives, the U.S. quickly poured cold water on that idea by sending strong signals of its dwindling patience and mounting irritation.

This approach can be characterized as America’s version of “critical dialogue” – extremely critical of “the unelected few” while offering an olive branch, in the form of dialogue, to the people and their elected representatives.

The current approach appears to be based on several foundations:

- the recognition that significant bodies of opinion in Iran favor sweeping reform, that there are more than just two camps, that the differences among different schools of thought are substantial, that young people are massively in favor of change, and that there are similar trends even among the senior clergy and other important sectors;
- the assumption, implicit in the declaration that change must come from within, that the U.S. cannot impose change, as it tried to do in the past, but that it can help by offering encouragement to the Iranian public, which has acted to decide its own fate over the past century and which does desire liberalization;
- the recognition that Khatami, though a symbol of the reform movement, is more the product of the spirit of change than its leader, and that the movement is stronger than the man who symbolizes it;
- the disappointment with Khatami, who has thus far failed to translate his inner desires into policy, and the recognition that, in the current reality, the “unelected” remain effectively in charge;
- the sense that this “dual-track” approach is best designed to intensify the domestic debate and accelerate the process of change.

Nevertheless, the U.S. cannot ignore the obstacles to the kinds of changes it wants. For one thing, Iran has significant interests in Afghanistan and Iraq, and while some of these overlap with those of the United States, they are not necessarily identical, and Iran cannot be expected to concede its own vital national interests. Moreover, allowing enmity toward the U.S. to lapse would almost constitute an open admission that the revolutionary path had failed. Equally important, popular social changes are inherently slow and unpredictable processes that cannot be easily yoked to an urgent timetable dictated by America’s war on terror. Finally, while the conservatives may lack an electoral majority, they do continue to control important assets – they speak in the name of Islam and base their authority on a constitution, they have the support of the armed forces, and they are unwilling to concede power voluntarily.

Since President Bush's July declaration, the domestic debate in Iran has taken on a new intensity, and the moderates have been subjected to crude threats against "the servants of the Great Satan." But as the internal struggle reaches new heights, it is important to view the changes in Iran in a longer-term historical perspective. In that perspective, the conservatives are swimming against the current of change. It is difficult to predict how and to what extent American policy will strengthen that current, just as it is difficult to know how the processes of change will affect the war on terror. But they will surely be affected by its outcome.

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