

Iran: A good test of U.S. diplomacy

Written by Jessica Dargiel

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JESSICA DARGIEL, OCT 24 2009

President Obama has deemed this an era of 'extended hand' diplomacy, in which the United States must reach out to its adversaries in an effort to build on mutual interests and respect. In doing so, U.S. diplomats have promised to utilize a strategy of smart power. The ability of such a strategy to meet U.S. needs and global problems now faces its first real test as the U.S. undergoes negotiations with Iran concerning their uranium enrichment program.

The case of Iran offers a crucial test of U.S. diplomacy tactics, as hard or soft power strategies alone will not bring about success with Iran. Following the G-8 meeting in April, President Obama stated that Iran faced the threat of increased sanctions provided that they did not begin talks concerning its uranium enrichment program before the 24th of September. Iran failed to meet this deadline. Instead, negotiations began October 1st in Geneva. Thus far there has been considerable progress as Iran has agreed, to the shock of many in the international community, to ship its enriched uranium stock abroad for refueling. In spite of these concessions, tensions remain high between Iran and many Western diplomats, as Iran has been resolute in its refusal to halt uranium enrichment while the talks are underway. Subsequently, the U.S. is faced with very limited options on how to proceed with this matter.

The apparent U.S. options are as follows: the U.S. can take the purely soft power routes of either pressing for tighter sanctions if Iran does not suspend its production until International Atomic Energy Agency inspections are complete, or the United States can opt not to act for the time being. The latter option still has significant implications for U.S. – Iranian relations, as it would send the message that the U.S. would be willing to tolerate the risk of Iranian nuclear capabilities. Alternatively, the U.S. could pursue a hard power approach which implies military engagement in Iran, an option which is not entirely in anyone's favor.

Whichever route President Obama decides, it is imperative that he works precipitously in order to maintain momentum in the talks with Iran. Any delay in negotiations creates greater risk that either President Obama or President Ahmadinejad may become sidetracked with the many pressing domestic issues currently facing both leaders respectively.

Considering that the current talks are the first round of open dialogue between these two countries in nearly 30 years, it is important to each side that they tread carefully in their pursuit of an agreement. However, this does not imply that the prospect of positive diplomatic relations should take precedence over a settlement on the uranium enrichment issue. Any agreement with Iran needs to be focused on greater transparency. Iran must consent to full disclosure of current and past weapons programs and allow permanent access to its enrichment sites for IAEA inspectors. They should no longer be permitted to hide behind the argument that the IAEA had suspended its reporting requirement, which would have obligated Iranian officials to report the enrichment facility near Qom.

If the United States, alongside the P5+1, does not manage to achieve such results, consequences could be rather dire. Any concessions the U.S. may grant to grant Iran will only serve to strengthen Ahmadinejad's position domestically. By challenging the Obama Administration, Ahmadinejad is able to convey a sense of power over the U.S. administration to his people. President Ahmadinejad is said to welcome any sanctions imposed on Iran for lack of compliance with IAEA regulations, as he claims such a move would only have the effect of making Iran more self-sufficient. Similarly, if the U.S. chooses not to pursue the issue any further at this point in time, the U.S. will appear weak.

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Alternatively, if Obama seeks to assert U.S. power by staging a military invasion of Iran, he would be forced to make a drastic change in policy concerning both Iraq and Afghanistan. With such an extensive number of troops deployed in those countries, and in the midst of a decision to send additional troops Afghanistan, the U.S. can not afford to commit itself to another conflict. The resources just simply are not there to make effective progress on all three fronts simultaneously.

Every action the President may take faces serious consequences. Hence, it is paramount that Obama is aware of the implications of his decision-making for the entire region. Many Arab countries look to the U.S. to protect them from Iran. If the U.S. emerges from these negotiations appearing weak it is possible the U.S. could lose its legitimacy in the region; a scenario with potentially devastating security implications. It is thus clear that hard or soft options alone are not desirable. So the question remains, what will President Obama opt to do? The answer will be a true test of the strength and ability of U.S. smart power diplomacy.

Jessica Dargiel recently completed her coursework for an MA in Conflict, Security and Development Studies from King's College London. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse, double majoring in political science and economics.