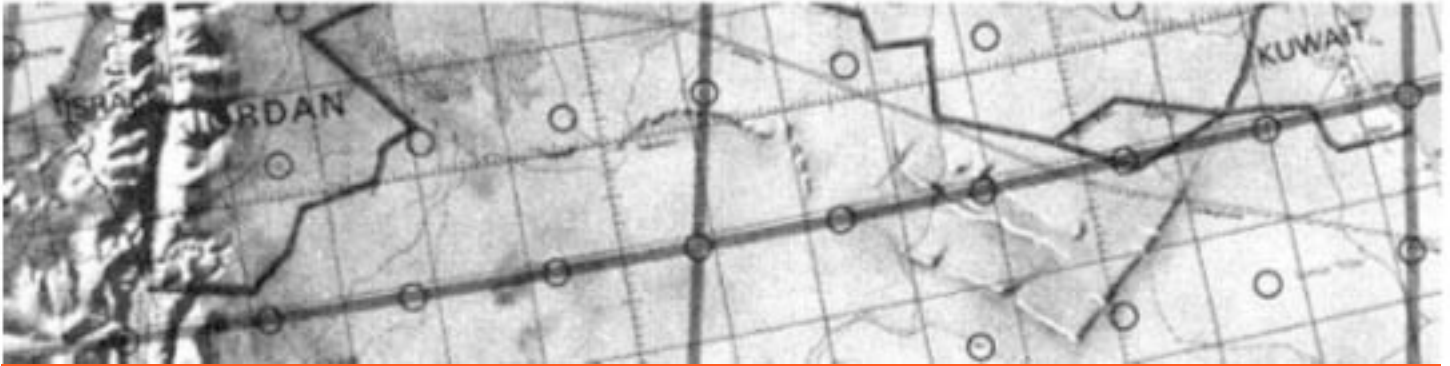


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Obama's Approach to Russia and Iran

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December 14, 2009 :: Number Eight

The Obama administration is optimistic about improved relations with Russia and Iran. Is this optimism realistic?

The Obama administration came into office last January seeking to improve American relations with Russia and Iran. Improved relations with Iran, it was hoped, would (among other things) persuade Tehran to end all activities that could turn Iran into a nuclear-armed state. Improved relations with Russia, it was also hoped, would lead (again, among other things) to greater Russian cooperation with the United States on the Iranian nuclear issue.

After over ten months in office, the Obama administration has not succeeded in improving relations with Iran. There has been a limited improvement in Russian-American rela-

tions, but the overall relationship remains poor, and Russia has not proved willing to “help us” with Iran, as so many hoped and even expected that it would.

Yet the Obama administration reportedly remains optimistic about improved relations with both Iran and Russia, and for progress on the Iranian nuclear issue. Is this optimism realistic? I will address this question by exploring how the administration plans to overcome the resistance of both Iran and Russia, how the Russian government views cooperation with the United States vis-à-vis Iran, and how the Iranian government views improved relations with the United States.

Neighborhoodly Obama

In a front-page *Washington Post* [article](#) published on November 2, Scott Wilson described how “President Obama is applying the same tools to international diplomacy that he once used as a community organizer on Chicago’s South Side.” Key to the success of this effort is identifying the common interests of all concerned: “As a community organizer, Obama worked to identify the common interests of neighborhoods suffering through the economic aftermath of plant closings and of the politicians elected to represent them.”

From this perspective, it is clear why the United States and Russia should cooperate on the Iranian nuclear issue. Both, after all, do not want to see Iran acquire nuclear weapons. Russia could help pressure Iran to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) by working with the United States to impose meaningful UN Security Council sanctions against Iran. And if Tehran were to see this cooperation materialize, it might back down before sanctions actually had to be imposed. In that light, canceling the Bush administration’s plan to deploy ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems in Poland and the Czech Republic (which the Obama administration didn’t like anyway) was a sacrifice that was well worth making to lift an obstacle to Russian-American cooperation on Iran.

But while cooperating with Russia on this issue is obviously a form of

pressure against Iran, the Obama administration has strongly signaled that, unlike the previous administration, it is also willing to cooperate with the Islamic Republic. The Obama team has made clear that it considers resolving the Iranian nuclear issue to be of far greater importance than human rights and democratization in Iran, which Obama does not wish to “impose” on Iran. Obama’s foreign policy team may also calculate that while the lack of human rights and democracy in Iran threatens Iranians, Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons would pose a threat to many other countries, and so the Iranian nuclear issue should have priority over the democracy and human rights agenda.

But Moscow and Tehran have not yet responded favorably to the Obama approach. Why have the Russian and the Iranian leaderships balked?

Russia’s own interests

Like Washington, Moscow does not wish to see Iran acquire nuclear weapons. But that is only half the story.

Even if Iran does acquire nuclear weapons, Moscow does not see Russia as being Iran’s target. Moreover, Russia has benefited enormously from the long-standing Iranian-American hostility. American economic sanctions against Iran, as well as American pressure on its Western allies to limit how much they invest in Iran, have facilitated Russian exports to and investments in Iran that might not have



been possible had Russia faced greater Western competition. Similarly, Iranian-American hostility has resulted in America blocking Iran as an export route for Caspian Basin oil and gas, as well as discouraging Iranian gas exports to the West. Since Moscow wants to serve as the principal export corridor for (and to exercise control over) Caspian Basin oil and gas, and since it does not want competition from Iran for the European gas market, the U.S. effort to isolate Iran has benefited Russia enormously.

What Moscow actually fears is that at some point there will be an Iranian-American rapprochement that results in an end to all these benefits for Russia. Further, Moscow is especially reluctant to cooperate with a U.S. effort to increase sanctions on Iran, which will worsen Russian-Iranian relations, precisely when the Obama administration has declared its desire to improve U.S.-Iranian relations. To the suspicious Kremlin mindset, it seems that Washington is asking Moscow to worsen its relations with Tehran in order for Washington to slip past it and improve U.S. relations with the Islamic Republic.

How does this viewpoint square with the recent signs that Moscow is cooperating with the Obama administration on the Iranian nuclear issue? Putin has, in fact, long proposed that Russia enrich Iran's uranium as a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue. Russia would gain financially and the West would depend on Russia as the guarantor that Iran is not enriching uranium to weapons grade. Thus, Moscow has a strong interest in participating in the latest proposed diplomatic effort on Iran, which calls for Tehran to ship most of its low-enriched uranium to Russia for further enrichment. But this is not an in-

crease in Russian cooperation with the United States. It is basically a reiteration of a standing Russian offer. Tehran did not accept these previous Russian offers, and may not accept this one either. While Moscow may (as before) then support Security Council sanctions against Iran, Moscow (also as before) won't support anything that seriously damages Tehran or Moscow's relations with it.

Regime preservation in Iran

The most basic goal of all regimes is to remain in power. This past summer, extraordinary protest arose in Iran against what was widely believed to be the falsification of Iranian election results in favor of presidential incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The scale of the protest prompted the Islamic Republic's leadership to worry that a democratic revolution could sweep it from power.

Throughout this crisis, the Obama administration adopted a restrained approach, reportedly for two reasons. First, it feared that overt American support for Mir Hussein Mousavi—the candidate whom Iranian democracy activists believe either won or received enough votes to force a runoff with Ahmadinejad—would undermine Mousavi by allowing the regime to claim that he was an American agent. Second, the Obama administration wanted to improve relations, and hopefully reach an agreement whereby Iran renounces nuclear weapons, regardless of who rules Iran. Thus, if Mousavi's challenge of the election results was going to fail anyway, it would have been counterproductive to antagonize those left holding power in Iran.

Given the suppression of the democratic opposition in Iran, the Obama administration's

restrained approach toward that country's electoral crisis appears to have been vindicated. There was really nothing that the United States, or any other government, could have done that would have enabled the Iranian democratic op-



position to succeed—especially when it did not ask for much by way of American support anyway. The administration perhaps expected that the victorious hard-liners in Tehran would be prepared to improve relations with a U.S. government that had demonstrated its intention *not* to threaten the Islamic Republic or its current leadership.

This expectation, however, has been disappointed. It is unclear whether the Obama administration's overtures to Tehran would have succeeded had there not been such widespread public opposition to the announcement that Ahmadinejad had won reelection in Iran. But because this extraordinary outburst—the largest demonstrations since the 1979 Iranian Revolution—did take place, Tehran is highly unlikely to pursue rapprochement with the United States, even though Tehran has largely succeeded in crushing the democratic opposition.

This is because Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i, President Ahmadinejad, and the other hard-liners in Tehran cannot admit—even to themselves—that the hundreds of thousands of protesters who came out onto the streets were only a domestically-based opposition. For the hard-liners, who have long said and

believed that America is their principal enemy, these demonstrations undoubtedly appear to have been somehow orchestrated by the United States. So while the Obama administration may congratulate itself (and conservative critics in the

United States may castigate it) for its hands-off approach to Iran's domestic crisis, Iranian hardliners (however incorrectly) see the United States as directly responsible for that crisis.

For them to do otherwise would require them to acknowledge and admit that declaring Ahmadinejad the victor was a mistake. Further, the hard-liners are likely to be suspicious of the Obama administration's willingness to accept Ahmadinejad's "victory" and improve relations with them. They undoubtedly fear that if the United States could (as they believe) organize widespread opposition inside Iran without an official U.S. government presence there, it would be in an even better position to do so with the increased U.S.-Iranian contacts that would result from a rapprochement.

Supreme Leader Khamene'i expressed just this sentiment in a speech commemorating the 30th anniversary of the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran: "Whenever they smile at the officials of the Islamic revolution, when we carefully look at the situation, we notice that they are hiding a dagger behind their back. They have not changed their intentions."

What this shows is that it isn't easy to approach suspicious authoritarian regimes that are on the defensive. Even the attempt to do so can make them *more* suspicious and defensive—especially when masses of protesters just happen to come out against them precisely when the United States is making its overture.

Community organizer flaw

After reviewing both Russian and Iranian attitudes, it is not surprising that the Obama administration's efforts to improve relations with both have not yet succeeded. Indeed, some might conclude that they are destined to fail. But the Obama administration thinks otherwise.

Let us return to that recent *Washington Post* article about President Obama drawing upon his experience as a community organizer in approaching foreign policy. As the author, Scott Wilson explained, "The role requires patience—a word used consistently by his advisers in regard to reviving Middle East peace talks or reaching out to Iran—and cultivating a lower profile than the other parties involved."

Will this patience ultimately prove justified? Or is it an example of—dare I say it?—liberal naïveté? The *Post* article quotes Obama's Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications, Ben Rhodes, as saying, "There is no naïveté here." Indeed, the Obama foreign policy team—and President Obama himself—are convinced that this approach is in fact not naïve, but tough-minded and even Machiavellian.

Why might President Obama and his closest associates think this? Let us review how it is that a community organizer—especially one

seeking to help disadvantaged minorities—operates in the American domestic political context. Traditionally, disadvantaged minorities have been alienated from the political process, and thus have not participated in it. And because they have not participated in it, elected politicians have had little or no incentive to look out for these communities in the same way that they do for more affluent, politically active ones—especially when the latter view disadvantaged minorities as a threat.

What the community organizer does is to increase the participation of disadvantaged minority groups in politics so that elected officials who may have previously ignored their interests can no longer afford to do so. This leads to a virtuous circle in which greater positive attention to the concerns of disadvantaged minorities results from their increased participation in politics. This leads to progressively greater minority participation in politics as more members of the minority see positive results from that participation.

Part of what motivates the community organizer is his or her perception of the rightness of the goals that he or she is pursuing. But the tactics that the community organizer employs are often sharp-edged: elected officials who do not do what the community organizer summons them to do risk being denounced as racists or being voted out of office by the community that the organizer has energized. Indeed, the ability of the community organizer to credibly isolate and thereby threaten politicians for non-cooperation is one of his or her most effective tools in achieving what are often positive, even noble, goals.

In pursuing a community-organizer approach to foreign policy, then, President Obama is

signaling that he is willing to isolate those who do not cooperate with what he sees as his positive goals, such as improving American relations with Russia and Iran. If certain American allies in Eastern Europe and the Middle

East do not like this, according to this approach, that's simply too bad. These allies have no other real choice but to cooperate with the United States anyway. And besides, they will surely benefit too from the better behavior expected to result from improved relations with hitherto anti-social regimes in Moscow and Tehran.

The Obama administration definitely seems to be casting Russia and Iran in the role of disadvantaged minority groups. It seeks to differentiate itself from the Bush administration by genuinely holding out the prospect of friendship and cooperation with them. But by pursuing rapprochement with both Moscow and Tehran simultaneously—American conservatives don't seem to have noticed—the Obama administration is also threatening each with isolation for non-cooperation. If Iran does not cooperate on the nuclear issue, then improved Russian-American relations will lead to Tehran being isolated from Russia (and probably China) as well as from the United States and the West, and thus facing the prospect of serious UN Security Council sanctions. And if Russia does not cooperate with the United States, then improved Iranian-American relations could result in America helping Iran to displace Russia as an



energy corridor for Caspian Basin oil and gas, as well as to compete with Russia as a gas supplier to Europe.

But whether the Obama administration's community-organizer approach to improving American ties to Russia and Iran

is as Machiavellian as I have portrayed it, or whether it is as naïve as American conservatives claim, I don't think it will succeed. This is because the logic of the community-organizer approach that has worked in the American domestic context does not apply with regard to Moscow and Tehran.

The community organizer approach has been successful in the American domestic context not just because elected politicians fear the rising cost of offending a disadvantaged minority that has become increasingly active politically. It is successful because the disadvantaged minority community increasingly sees the advantages of participating in the political system instead of remaining outside of it.

For the authoritarian rulers of Russia and Iran, however, this logic does not apply. Whatever legitimacy and popularity they do enjoy depends on their successfully stoking nationalist resentment against America and the West. Unlike disadvantaged minority communities inside the United States, authoritarian leaders abroad regard cooperating with Washington as risky. What the Russian and Iranian leadership especially fear is democratic revolution that would overthrow them, and they believe increased cooperation

with Washington is more likely to bring this about. Under current conditions, then, neither Moscow nor Tehran is likely to respond positively to the Obama administration's community-organizer foreign policy approach. Unlike American conservatives, they don't think Obama is as naïve as he might appear. They see him as wanting to befriend them in order to be better positioned to bring about their downfall.

U.S. the greater threat?

Now some might say that I am overestimating how much the Russian and Iranian governments might see improved relations with the United States leading to their downfall. After all, several formerly anti-American authoritarian regimes have improved relations with the United States without falling from power. China, Vietnam, and Libya are all examples. But such regimes have usually agreed to improve relations with Washington only when they have faced some other state or movement posing an even greater threat to

their survival. (In China's case, this threat was the Soviet Union; in Vietnam's, it was China; and in Libya's, it was Islamist movements linked to Al Qaeda.)

At present, neither Moscow nor Tehran sees itself as facing a threat that might drive it into Washington's arms—and risk the danger of democratization they think this would entail. Certainly neither Moscow nor Tehran sees the other as posing any such threat. And only if the authoritarian governments in Russia and Iran see such a threat emerging might either have a change of heart. In fact, I would argue that radical Sunni Islamism is a threat to both, but unless and until either Moscow, Tehran, or both recognize it as such, neither is likely to respond positively to Obama's community-organizer foreign policy approach. ••

This paper is a longer version of a lecture delivered at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service on November 18, 2009. The author would like to thank New York University Professor (and MESH member) Michael Doran for the invitation to speak.

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