How to Rescue Obama's Engagement Policy with Iran

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At the start of the 2012 U.S. election year, Iran is firmly at the top of Obama's foreign policy priorities. During the past decade, U.S.-Iran relations and Iran's nuclear dossier has puzzled Washington, which has struggled to find a workable solution.

Regarding the nuclear issue, I am totally convinced that it is purely a political matter and not a legal or technical dispute. The IAEA will never announce that all nuclear materials in Iran are for peaceful use, unless political compromises on some major issues are reached.

Iran's nuclear impasse is a subsidiary issue of Iran-Western relations, particularly Iran-U.S. relations. Iran is the most sanctioned country in the world, while countries like India, Pakistan, and Israel enjoy strategic relations with the United States and the West, even though they are not members of Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and poses massive arsenals of nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, the West and the United States rewarded India and Pakistan after they acquired and tested the nuclear bomb by lifting sanctions and establishing strategic relations, even within the nuclear field as is the case with India.

What is ironic and blatantly hypocritical is the fact that the sanction regime and pressures levied on Iran greatly surpass those placed on North Korea. While the

North Koreans have withdrawn from the NPT and conducted nuclear weapons tests, Iran has remained committed to the NPT, does not possess a nuclear bomb, and, for nine consecutive years, the IAEA has found no evidence of diversion towards a nuclear bomb.

In terms of Iran-U.S. relations, President Obama made the unprecedented move in 2009 of proposing an engagement policy with Iran to resolve the animosities that have plagued bilateral relations for the past three decades.

Iran welcomed Obama's "engagement policy" by offering a "grand bargain." Ahmadinejad has been the first Iranian president since the 1979 revolution that has had a freer hand toward rapprochement with the United States. Mohamed ElBaradei revealed in his memoir that Ahmadinejad sent a message offering a grand bargain to Barack Obama in 2009 by detailing Iran's readiness to hold direct talks with the United States, to engage in bilateral negotiations, without conditions, on the basis of mutual respect, and by helping the United States in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

I have been involved in Iran-Western relations for a quarter century, taking part in major efforts to improve Iran-U.S. relations, and I believe, despite Ahmadinejad's harsh rhetoric, in practice Iran has made far-reaching overtures for rapprochement with Washington.

Now, I would like to assess some of the major developments during the Ahmadinejad-Obama era:

1- Iran agreed to have official meetings at the ambassadorial level in Baghdad, to discuss the Iraqi crisis in 2007.
2- Iran took the first initiative to conduct official letter exchanges between the presidents. Ahmadinejad's letters to presidents Bush and Obama,

congratulating the latter of his election, were unprecedented since the 1979 revolution. Meanwhile, neither U.S. president responded.

3- President Obama was the first U.S. president to write directly to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and was reciprocated by the Leader.

4- U.S. Under Secretary William Burns and Iran's Secretary of National Security Council Saeed Jalili met in Geneva in October 2009 and agreed on a swap deal. Based on this deal, Iran would ship out of the country 1,200 kg of low-enriched uranium; in return the P5+1 would provide fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor.

   However, the initiative fell through, because Iran proposed a simultaneous exchange to take place in Iran, but the P5+1 rejected this. Almost all politicians and scholars in the United States blame Tehran for its dismissal of Obama by refusal of the offer. But the fact is that soon after this breakdown, Iran told Mohammad ElBaradei, the director general of the IAEA, that Tehran was ready to make the deal directly with Washington without those preconditions, an offer which was rejected. Later, Iran agreed to the Obama administration's terms by signing the fuel swap with Brazil and Turkey, but again the United States rejected.

5- In early 2011, during a meeting held in Stockholm, Iran proposed a desire to extend an invitation for the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan, Marc Grossman, to visit Tehran for talks on Iran-U.S. cooperation on Afghanistan. Washington ignored this show of goodwill.

6- In mid-2011, Iran welcomed the Russian Step-by-Step proposal which consisted of:

   - Full supervision by the IAEA for five years;

- Implementation of NPT Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement;
- Stopping production of highly enriched uranium (HEU) and limiting enrichment to 5%;
- Stopping the installation of new centrifuges;
- Limiting enrichment sites to only one;
- Addressing the IAEA's "possible military dimension" concerns and other technical ambiguities; and
- Finally, temporarily suspending enrichment.

In return, Iran's expectations were for the P5+1 to gradually remove sanctions and normalize Iran's nuclear file in the IAEA and U.N. Security Council. But again, the United States rejected.

7- In summer 2011, the IAEA team led by deputy director general Herman Nackaerts visited Tehran. Iran offered him a blank check for any inspection the IAEA wished. The inspectors visited the Research & Development (R&D) sections of the heavy water facilities and of the facilities for the new generation of centrifuges. This initiative was in line with the Additional Protocol. By this step, Iran registered itself at the IAEA as the first country ever to permit the agency to visit R&D centrifuge facilities.

At the end of the visit, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Abbasi-Davani, offered "full IAEA supervision," including implementation of the Additional Protocol for five years, provided that sanctions against Iran are lifted. Again, the offer was rejected by the United States.

8- Trying to make the decision easier for Obama, during his trip to New York in September 2011, Ahmadinejad announced the release of the American hikers and signaled Iran's readiness to immediately stop uranium enrichment

at the 20 percent level, if Iran was given fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor. This was an immensely important move to demonstrate that Iran is not seeking highly enriched uranium. The United States neither appreciated the freedom of the hikers nor welcomed the offer to stop high-level enrichment in Iran.

The West gave seven rewards in response to Iran's seven overtures:

1. Iran was accused for planning a plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador in Washington.
2. Influenced the substance and tone of IAEA's November report accusing Iran of possible military dimensions to its nuclear program.
3. Sanctioning the Central Bank of Iran.
4. Placing an oil embargo.
5. Increasing unilateral sanctions.
6. Sponsoring a U.N. resolution against Iran on terrorism and orchestrating an additional U.N. resolution condemning Iran on human rights.
7. Escalating covert operations by further assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists.

Explaining his Iran policy in New York in January 2012, Obama proudly announced that he had mobilized the world and built an "unprecedented" sanctions regime targeting Iran. Obama said U.S.-led sanctions had reduced Iran's economy to "shambles."[1]

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[1]http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gBxDdCgwUv8X2qbVyAQNwWAlP6rg?docId=CNG.88737ace4800efd85d9752c4c64d58bb.f1

Three years after the Obama administration introduced its engagement policy, Secretary Panetta named Iran a "pariah state," reminiscent of previous U.S. administrations' branding of Iran as part of an "axis of evil." Secretary Panetta said that he hoped Obama's policy of increased sanctions and pressures would "weaken this nation so that ultimately they have to make a decision about whether they continue to be a pariah or whether they decide to join the international community."[2]

To me, these statements are clear evidence that the engagement policy has failed miserably. To be realistic, none of the U.S. administrations have been able to adopt a comprehensive policy to end hostilities with Iran.

Where is the problem?

A: The United States has to recognize that the mistrust is mutual. The United States has its own grievances, while Iran also has great mistrust of the United States, dating back to early 1950s:

- In 1953, the United States managed a coup against the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran.

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[1]http://www.defense.gov/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937

- The United States installed a dictator, whom they supported for a quarter of a century (1953-79).
- Following the 1979 revolution, the United States supported Saddam Hussein in his invasion of Iran, which lasted eight years and resulted in the death of 300,000 Iranians, a trillion dollars worth of damages, and 2 million internally displaced Iranians.
- Saddam used chemical weapons indiscriminately on Iran during the war, resulting in the death and injury of thousands. Unfortunately, the West provided material and technology for Saddam's chemical weapons program. The then-chairman of the senate banking committee, Don Riegle, said: "The executive branch of our government approved 771 different export licenses for sale of dual-use technology to Iraq. I think it is a devastating record."
- In 1988, the United States launched the largest American naval combat operation since World War II, striking Iranian oil platforms in the Persian Gulf.
- On July 3rd, 1988, during the Iran–Iraq War, the U.S. Navy guided missile cruiser USS Vincennes shot down an Iranian civilian plane (Airbus A300B2) over the Persian Gulf killing 290 civilians, including 66 children.

B: The second obstacle is that the United States has not been able to distance itself from the sanction policy that has been in place on Iran since 1979. Let me quote you the conclusion of Amb. John Limbert, who served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iran in 2009-10, regarding U.S. policy on Iran:

"Actually, since 1979, we've used sanctions against Iran. They're something we know. We know how to apply them, how to negotiate them, how to negotiate with the Russians or with the Chinese or with the P5+1, how to get them through the U.N. But we do not know how to change the unproductive relationship that we've had with Iran for the last 30 years".

C: The overt strategy of all U.S. administrations has been based on a "dual-track approach." Each U.S. administration has presented the dual-track policy with its own label such as, "carrot and stick," "diplomacy with pressure." However, in practice, they all have meant "99% sticks" and "1% carrots."

In response to the U.S. dual-track policy, Ayatollah Khamenei noted, "They say that they have extended their hand towards Iran. What kind of hand? If it is an iron hand covered with a velvet glove, then it will not make any good sense." These actions have made the Iranian side believe that the U.S. policy of engagement with Iran is just lip service.

Iran meanwhile has pursued a dual track of its own. Ahmadinejad has sabotaged his engagement policy with inflammatory rhetoric that has antagonized the United States and its allies by questioning the Holocaust, suggesting that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were a U.S. government conspiracy, and that Israel must be erased from the pages of history.

D: "Regime change" has been the core objective of all U.S. administrations since the 1979 revolution, as exemplified by U.S. officials' comments:

-On the sanction bill passed against Iran's Central Bank, Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) said:

"The intent of this plan is to cause so much suffering among ordinary Iranians that they will be forced to rise up against the regime and, if that doesn't work, we will go to war with Iran."

-The House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a broad sanctions (H.R.1905) bill targeting Iran, to which Representative Brad Sherman (D-CA) said:

"Critics [of the sanctions] argued that these measures will hurt the Iranian people. Quite frankly, we need to do just that."

E: The heart of the matter is that both sides are confused about whether engagement is, for the other side, a strategy or a tactic.

Calls from Iran for comprehensive negotiations are dismissed in Washington as stalling tactics to buy time for its nuclear program to move forward.

Talk from America about unclenching fists and opportunities to restore confidence are dismissed in Tehran as a way to increase pressures while preempting criticism that the United States did not exhaust diplomatic options.

F: The United States and its allies want a step-by-step process, involving small steps to build confidence and to provide a temporary compromise, to be followed with an enduring solution for the Iranian nuclear issue.

Iranians have experienced such piecemeal policies for the last three decades with no success. Due to these past experiences, Iran wants to be sure of the entire game

plan, including the end goal, before committing itself to anything. Hence a mixed approach is required.

What is the realistic approach?

To end the present deadlock on the Iranian nuclear issue, there is a need for a "grand agenda" of negotiations, which simultaneously addresses Iran-U.S. bilateral relations and the nuclear issue. The Iran-U.S. package should be negotiated directly between Tehran and Washington, while Iran's nuclear issue can be negotiated in the framework of the P5+1 talks.

Rapprochement between Washington and Tehran will be possible only when and if negotiations begin on a "grand agenda":

1- The sides need to agree on a comprehensive agenda, including all bilateral, regional, and international issues, that demonstrates the entire game plan, but implements it through a "Grand Phased Approach."
2- Dual-track approaches are ceased. "You can never find a train that could run on two tracks at the same time."
3- The language of threats and angry rhetoric is set aside.
4- Hostile actions, sanctions, and other forms of coercive pressure are put on hold.
5- Domestic political factions in both countries are convinced to cooperate, at least temporarily, while negotiations are conducted.
6- Issues of common interest are given priority in the talks, such as:

- Cooperation on security and stability in Afghanistan

- Preventing a full return to power of the Taliban
- Combating drug trafficking
- Stability, peace, and security in Iraq
- Creating a regional cooperation system for the Persian Gulf, to ensure peace and stability in the region
- On incidents at sea, freedom of navigation, and counter-piracy cooperation
- Encouraging stability in Central Asia and Caucasus

The Framework on Nuclear Dilemma:

1-To ensure transparency about its nuclear program, Iran could adhere to all international nuclear conventions and treaties at the maximum level of transparency defined by the IAEA. However, Iran should not be required to accept discriminatory constraints or obligations that go beyond international arrangements, rules and regulations.

2-In return, the P5+1 countries should remove Iran's nuclear file from the agenda of the IAEA Board of Governors and the Security Council, and recognize Iran's rights to nuclear.