

Philipp Merrill Fellowship Essay Contest

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"Since 2012 is a crucial election year, American diplomacy will inevitably be partly conditioned by politics with respect to certain major foreign policy challenges. How might the political campaign affect the Administration's diplomacy involving *one* of the following issues, and how could such constraints be minimized?

(b) Negotiating with Iran over its nuclear weapons ambitions;

Presidential election years in the United States (US) can be a fraught time for consistency in foreign policy, as the administration in power is politically vulnerable to attacks for perceived shortcomings and can be pressured to adapt policy to address these failures.

This is especially true with an issue such as Iran's potential for acquiring nuclear weapons capability. Iran has been a belligerent nation in the eyes of many American voters since the fall of the Shah and the hostage crisis in 1979-1981. Iran's bellicose rhetoric directed at Israel frightens the significant Jewish electorate. Iran's sponsoring of terrorism and its poor human rights record further colors perceptions. Furthermore, this is an issue where facts and clear-cut positions are scarce: what is Iran's final objective, how close is it to "break-out" capability, what are the "red lines" for Israel and the US? The extent to which this topic resounds for the US electorate has been recognized by the administration's political opponents and the Obama administration is under pressure to justify its policy to date in the face of accusations of weakness and ineffectiveness.

Candidates for the Republican Party presidential nomination have an interest in painting the current administration as weak on foreign policy. One of the angles of attack used to date has been the administration's failure to force Iran to clarify the purpose of its nuclear program. While Iran insists that the program is for peaceful energy purposes and consistent with its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, many countries fear that its final objective is to develop nuclear weapons capability. Numerous United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions have called on Iran to cease its uranium enrichment and Iran's refusal to do so have led to several rounds of UNSC sanctions, as well as stricter ones from the US and Members of the European Union (EU). Matters have come to a head this year, with Israeli officials indicating that they are convinced that Iran is developing nuclear weapons and much speculation in the Israeli and international media that a unilateral Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities is imminent.

Current US administration policy is to coerce Iran into clarifying its nuclear ambitions and abide by UNSC Resolutions. On February 29th 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that "It's absolutely clear that the president's policy is to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons capability".¹ On the other hand, the US wishes to head off any unilateral Israeli military action over the issue, which the administration believes could put US troops and assets in the region at risk,

¹ House Committee on Foreign Affairs Hearings, 29 February 2012. Assessing U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities amidst Economic Challenges: The Foreign Relations Budget for Fiscal Year 2013. http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing_notice.asp?id=1407

lead to a wider regional conflagration, have devastating effects on the global economy and raise oil prices. The current approach is to work closely with allies to increase pressure and sanctions on Iran to coerce it to modify its behavior, while insisting that “no options are off the table” should Iran be undeterred.

Iran’s continuing uranium enrichment has led to an opening for candidates to the Republican presidential nomination and pressure groups to attack the administration’s policy, thus putting pressure on the administration to change its approach. In early January 2012, Republican candidate Mitt Romney said: “I want to make sure that the people of this nation understand that he (Obama) failed us not only here at home, he’s failed us in dealing with the greatest threat we face, which comes from Iran”.² Rick Santorum, another republican presidential candidate, has criticized Obama’s attempts to negotiate with Iran: “I would be saying to the Iranians, you either open up those facilities, you begin to dismantle them and, and make them available to inspectors, or we will degrade those facilities through airstrikes and make it very public that we are doing that”.³

This type of rhetoric appeals to US voters who are worried of the consequences of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons capability. It puts pressure on the Obama administration to justify its current policy and demonstrate results. But the other audience is the Israeli government; the US must convince them that military strikes are unnecessary and ill-advised at this point in time.

The US should demonstrate, through public pronouncements, that the current round of sanctions and pressure on Iran is having more effect on the country’s economy than previous rounds and is putting unprecedented strain on the country’s leaders. Since a report published on 8 November 2011 by the IAEA that raised further questions about Iran’s nuclear program, the U.S. and the EU have enacted increasingly stringent and apparently effective economic penalties -- including U.S. sanctions on non-petroleum transactions with the Iranian central bank that took effect on 29 February 2012 and an EU embargo on Iranian oil that starts on 1 July 2012.

US policy-makers are clearly putting an onus on emphasizing the effects of most recent sanctions. On February 29th, U.S. Undersecretary of Treasury David Cohen said the sustained global sanction effort “has brought very substantial economic and financial pressure on the Iranian regime” and that this pressure was reflected “most dramatically in its plummeting currency”. He went on to say that “International sanctions have disrupted Iranian trade to such an extent that, as of late last year, many Iranian banks were

² “Obama Inks Iran Penalties, Tehran Calls for Atomic Discussions.” Global Security Newswire 3 Jan. 2012. Retrieved 28 Feb. 2012 from <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/obama-inks-iran-penalties-bill-tehran-calls-atomic-discussions/>

³ Lindborg, C., “Iran, the IAEA, and the U.S. presidential race”. BASIC News 30 Jan. 2012. Retrieved 28 February 2012 from <http://www.basicint.org/news/2012/iran-iaea-and-us-presidential-race>.

experiencing capital shortages".⁴ Cohen's comments were echoed by Secretary Clinton before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on the same day, when she said sanctions are working: "They are producing the kind of pressure we had hoped for ... and are having an impact inside Iran".

The US should also enlist other countries to follow its lead of imposing tough sanctions and put pressure on countries still doing business with Iran. The US has aggressively lobbied countries such as Japan, South Korea and China. On a visit to Seoul on 17 January 2012, Robert Einhorn, the US State Department's special adviser for non-proliferation and arms control, said "We are urging (our partners) to reduce their purchase of crude oil from Iran and their financial dealings with the central bank of Iran".⁵ The US should use its influence to make clear to countries doing business with Iran that there will be very little flexibility accorded even to close Allies concerning the globally-applicable sanctions on non-petroleum transactions.

In parallel to the sanctions efforts, the administration must pursue its stated policy of avoiding further military activity around the Persian Gulf, which would severely impact American interests. To that end, the administration must publicly and privately reiterate its steadfast commitment to the security of Israel. On 5 February 2012, President Obama stated that his "no. 1 priority continues to be the security of the United States, but also, the security of Israel" and that "we are going to be sure that we work in lockstep as we proceed to try to solve this — hopefully diplomatically".⁶ Prime Minister's Netanyahu's visit to Washington next week will provide President Obama with further opportunities to express this commitment, as will the President's scheduled speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference. Furthermore, to the extent that the US government has been responsible for recent covert action against Iranian nuclear facilities and scientists, it should reassure Israel of its commitment to continue degrading the Iranian program until a military strike is no longer necessary.

Finally, and most difficultly, the US must make use of its diplomatic back-channels with Iran to work with its leaders in finding a solution out of the current situation, which, to the extent possible, allows Iranian leaders to back down while saving face domestically and does not open President Obama to accusations of appeasement and naïveté. It must also continue to state that it is open to continuing negotiations with Iran under the P5+1 format if Iran brings substantive proposals to the table.

⁴ "Remarks by Under Secretary David Cohen at the SIFMA Anti-Money Laundering & Financial Crimes Conference" delivered 2/29/2012, US Dept. of Treasury Website. Retrieved 29 Feb. 2012 from <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1436.aspx>.

⁵ Sang-Hun C. "U.S. Presses South Korea to Reduce Oil Imports from Iran". *NYT online* 17 January 2012. Retrieved 29 Feb. 2012 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/18/world/asia/us-presses-south-korea-to-reduce-oil-imports-from-iran.html>

⁶ Henderson, B. "Barack Obama says US and Israel 'in lockstep' on Iran". *The Telegraph online* 6 Feb. 2012. Retrieved 29 Feb. 2012 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9063009/Barack-Obama-says-US-and-Israel-in-lockstep-on-Iran.html>

The administration must walk a fine line between political and strategic considerations. Its best policy is to publicly insist on the success of recently invigorated sanction efforts, reassure Israel of US commitment to Israeli's security and attempt to find a way out of the escalating crisis through discrete contacts with the Iranian authorities.