

The Promise and Perils of Engagement

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Barack Obama's presidency appears to be making "engagement" the watchword of its foreign policy and ushering in a new era of engagement in international relations. The rush of enthusiasm generated by Obama's "fresh" approach to the rest of the world owes something to the longstanding belief that more can be accomplished by interacting positively with rivals and adversaries than by confronting or even just shunning them. But it is no less a function of the relief felt by many at the mere fact that Obama has branded his policy differently than did his predecessor, or in other words, that Obama is simply not George W. Bush. However, engagement is a rather nebulous concept that must be sharpened in order to fulfill its potential and avoid its pitfalls. Most importantly, it must be rigorously pursued as a policy instrument, not as an end in itself.

Engagement: Strategy or Therapy?

There is no universally accepted definition of engagement as a political strategy. The British government's Sustainable Development Commission extols it as a useful "generic term to explore all approaches of engaging stakeholders, rather than to describe a specific process. It can be taken to cover a whole spectrum of different types of engagement and activities." A more jaded view in the London *Sunday Times* claims that it used to mean an appointment or a promise to marry, but that at least in the domestic discourse, it is now used by politicians who "want to 'talk to' or even 'listen to' the electorate (the latter is more common)," most often by Members of Parliament about to lose their jobs. In foreign policy, the term is widely understood to

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mean a conscious effort not just to communicate directly with other international actors (as, for example, the first Bush administration did with Saddam Hussein in 1991 just before it launched a devastating war to eject Iraq from Kuwait), but also to interact in a constructive manner in order to facilitate, through positive rhetorical gestures and material inducements, the non-violent achievement of foreign policy objectives. As such, engagement is understood to be the polar opposite of a confrontational though equally non-violent approach to rivals and adversaries: ostracism and boycott.

Engagement and its Alternative: The Performance Test

The debate between these two approaches is sometimes couched in humanitarian terms. For example, when diplomatic boycotts are accompanied by economic and social sanctions, critics often charge that these measures inflict hardship on ordinary people or innocent bystanders rather than on the true architects of objectionable policies – particular leaders or even an entire regime. For the most part, however, the arguments revolve around a more pragmatic question: “Which approach is more likely to elicit desired changes on the part of the targeted actor?” Advocates of engagement insist that interaction will dispel possible misunderstandings, improve the psychological

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climate for agreement by reducing insecurities and suspicions of hostile intent, and change the incentive structure for compliance by enhancing the stakes of the adversary in positive outcomes, whereas isolation and boycott will intensify both the will to resist change (lest compliance be taken as surrender) and the capacity to do so (by stimulating national or group solidarity) on the other side. Defenders of attempts to isolate and/or boycott governments and regimes argue that

such actions will undermine the targets’ ability to persist in objectionable policies, or even to survive, by depriving them of legitimacy, material resources, and domestic support while empowering – at least psychologically – their internal and foreign rivals.

History does not readily supply any persuasive conclusions about this debate, precisely because it involves so many different variables

and has produced such mixed results. On the whole, however, it seems that the degree to which policy and /or regime changes can be attributed to shunning depends on the comprehensiveness of the boycott and the breadth of the multilateral coalition arrayed against the targeted party. That is probably why the dissolution of the apartheid system in South Africa is one of the few cases cited as a successful use of this approach (though there were certainly other factors at work as well). Still, such cases are quite rare. Ordinarily, attempts to isolate a particular actor, when pursued only by a narrow coalition, and certainly by only one international actor, seem to have had little direct effect on the policies of the targeted party, and certainly on the survival of its regime. This is so even when the isolator is a superpower (e.g., the United States) and the targeted party is a small state hitherto highly dependent on its bilateral relationship with that superpower (e.g., Cuba under Castro). Indeed, the basic explanation given by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for the Obama administration's decision to abandon the effort of previous administrations to isolate Iran was that "it didn't work." That may be undeniable, but it begs the question whether it didn't work because it is inherently unworkable or because it was applied by too few international actors to make it effective.

The Historical Record

Given the rather modest track record of efforts to shun and isolate, it is actually striking that so many parties have persisted so long in them. Nevertheless, the list is quite impressive. Apart from the South African and Cuban cases, the more blatant examples, just since World War II, include total American boycotts of the People's Republic of China, Libya, Iraq, and Iran; European efforts to boycott and isolate the government of Alexandr Lukashenko in Belarus; the Hallstein Doctrine, whereby West Germany boycotted not only the German Democratic Republic (until the adoption of *ostpolitik* by Chancellor Willi Brandt) but also other countries that recognized the GDR (until that was conceded to be unworkable); PRC efforts to isolate the Republic of China (Taiwan); attempts by some Arabs to isolate Egypt after it signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979; and, of course, the longstanding refusal of all Arab states (until 1979) and Iran (since that same year) to have any truck or trade with Israel. In addition to these examples of state shunning,

there are numerous cases of third party shunning of non-state actors, usually because of their involvement in terrorism, the most prominent Middle Eastern examples being the refusal by Israel and many Western countries to engage the PLO (until the 1980s), Hizbollah, and Hamas.

Of course, not all cases even in this incomplete roster share the same characteristics. In some, the purpose of the isolators was to persuade/coerce the targeted parties “merely” to change policies, on matters ranging from domestic governance (Belarus) through mass destruction weapons development (Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea) to support for or practice of terrorism (Iran, Libya, non-state actors). In others, the purpose – or, at least, aspiration – was rather to effect the entire collapse of the regime or political system (e.g., South Africa, PRC, and Cuba). In the most extreme cases, the purpose was to end the existence of the targeted actor as a separate political entity (e.g., East Germany, Taiwan, and Israel). Even in two of these extreme cases, however – East Germany and Taiwan – it is noteworthy that the prime isolators eventually reversed course and decided that engagement was actually a more promising path to what remained their absolutist objective. Only with respect to Israel have adversaries maintained what is almost a hermetic seal on relations, both official and unofficial; any willingness to engage on the issues has been with third parties, in the hope of generating pressure on Israel, rather than with Israel itself.

The Attractions of Engagement

Yet whatever the purpose of shunning, it has almost never proved to be successful. Indeed, there are even instances of governments (e.g., Albania, Myanmar) sometimes consciously practicing self-isolation as strategies of regime survival. Given that history, it is therefore puzzling why so many actors have adopted that approach and persisted in it for so long. Most of the explanations appear to be connected with prestige or domestic politics, i.e., the reluctance to admit that an existing policy has failed or the impact of domestic pressure groups. The latter factor has been particularly prominent in the United States (e.g., the so-called “China Lobby” in the 1950s and Cuban-Americans since 1959), though it is hardly confined to that country or even to democratic countries in general. It might well be the case that the firm stance against any sort of “normalization” with Israel, even in countries that

have peace agreements with Israel and certainly in those that don't, is also a reflection of sensitivity to Arab public opinion, regardless of how authoritarian those countries' regimes are in other respects. These factors, though not totally insignificant, have nevertheless proved increasingly unable to counter the performance test.

By that same test, however, the record of engagement is not that much more impressive. Its most frequently-cited success is the transformation of Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, often attributed to West Germany's *ostpolitik* and other forms of Western engagement over the years (e.g., Pugwash conferences, economic ties, cultural exchanges, Helsinki/CSCE). Yet even that conclusion is not indisputable. It is equally plausible that Communism in the Soviet Union and its East European satellites was intrinsically dysfunctional and that the internal strains were intensified in the 1980s by a combination of technological change (East Germans, at least, had long watched West German television) and economic stress caused by an inconclusive war in Afghanistan and a self-defeating effort to compete in an accelerated arms race. In any event, this one outcome, as historically momentous as it may be, is too ambiguous to provide conclusive proof of the comparatively greater effectiveness of engagement.

So why does the tide of conceptual battle between shunning and engagement seem to be turning in favor the latter, at least in the West? Apart from the performance test results, the most probable explanation stems from the growing belief, not necessarily that real conflicts of interest, ideology, or identity do not exist, but rather:

1. That these conflicts are often exacerbated by misunderstandings and exaggerated suspicions, and that the obstacles to conflict resolution can best be overcome by engagement. This belief is grounded in empirical historical research about the outbreak of the First World War and the Korean War – though not the Second World War – as well as in the evolution of the European Union over the last half of the twentieth century, a bloc for which engagement has become a cardinal precept of foreign policy; and
2. That even if engagement ultimately does not produce the desired outcomes, there is little “downside” risk in trying, that is, no serious cost is incurred even if it fails.

It is important to stress that the logic of engagement is more sophisticated than the simple bromides often used to justify it. Advocates of engagement often cite Winston Churchill's dictum that "jaw-jaw is better than war-war." But engagement is more than simple communication, which may be enhanced by direct interaction but is not strictly dependent on it. Talking can also take place with the help of or even through the medium of third parties. Instead, engagement also implies some gestures and actions directed at the various lower echelons of the other party's political structures, media, and public opinion. Moreover, "war-war" is not the only alternative to "jaw-jaw," since the absence or failure of talks can also be non-violent sanctions or simply the prolongation of the status quo. Nor is the cliché that "peace is made with enemies" very instructive; its relevance depends on the nature of the enemy and the kinds of behavior and policies it pursues that engagement is intended to influence.

But while some enemies may indeed be irreconcilable – the whole world is not divided only between current partners and future partners – and some behaviors or policies cannot plausibly be changed by non-coercive means, it can be credibly argued that the applicability of these generalizations to specific cases can only be determined through a good faith effort at engagement. Ordinarily, however, this

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cannot be carried out without risk or cost. One immediate cost is the de facto legitimization of the hitherto shunned target of engagement. The very fact of direct interaction with adversaries confirms their importance or viability, which explains why such parties are so desperate for highly publicized meetings and negotiations with other international actors, even (as in the case of Hamas) when the international actors are marginal and/or lame duck members of the British Parliament or former American presidents out of office for three decades. This is not just a matter of prestige. Engagement of international

actors has important ramifications for local and regional balances of power, because it empowers the local or regional actor being engaged – some Iranian commentators have already characterized Obama's

demarche as an admission of American weakness – while undermining the self-confidence of its rivals or adversaries. In many cases, local or regional contests are played out in front of audiences or publics whose positions are influenced by a sense of future power dynamics, i.e., of whose side history is on, and that is why ambivalence is probably a charitable adjective to describe the attitudes of some Arab states, the March 14 coalition in Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority toward Western proposals to engage Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas, respectively.

Secondly, engagement implies the risk that its authors will invest their self-esteem in its success, thereby preventing them from dispassionately assessing its efficacy. Rather than ever concluding that it hasn't worked, they will persuade themselves that it just hasn't worked yet, and that what is needed is not policy adjustment but just more effort. True, the same instinct may also operate when policies of coercion and even military force are being pursued; there too, policymakers are often inclined to throw good money (as well as lives and other resources) after bad, rather than tacitly acknowledging that they were wrong. The difference, however, is that at least in the early stages, such policies are less likely to provoke international and even domestic pressure to persist. By contrast, policymakers tempted to reassess engagement, whenever they do so, will almost certainly be advised by the international community that it is still too early to despair.

Notwithstanding these concerns, engagement in recent years has become increasingly prominent in the political strategies of major powers, not just because its alternative is seen to be so futile (if not counterproductive), but also because efforts to pursue it are seen to be necessary to reduce tensions with allies and friends who do adhere to the approach and to accumulate the domestic and international political capital that could sustain more effective sanctions (non-violent and even military) if engagement eventually fails to produce the desired results. In other words, engagement recommends itself either because it will work or because the exercise will overcome obstacles, especially the absence of a sufficiently broad international coalition, which prevented previous exercises in shunning, boycott, and confrontation from working.

The United States and Iran

Engagement has been a longstanding pillar of European policy. Contrary to widespread perceptions, it has also rarely been entirely absent from American policy. Under Obama, however, the United States has embraced engagement in a way that is presented – and interpreted – as a major reorientation in America’s approach to the world. In many major speeches, including his inaugural address, Obama has signaled his intention to extend an open hand to others and to keep it open to whoever does not respond with a clenched fist. (Secretary of State Clinton has also announced a desire for a comprehensive “reset” of relations with Russia.) These rhetorical signals have been accompanied by concrete gestures. To Cuba, Obama has proposed to ease restrictions on financial transfers and travel of Cuban-Americans to Cuba and to readmit Cuba to the Organization of American States. To Syria, Obama has sent a special envoy and signaled his intention to dispatch a resident American ambassador after several years during which the post was vacant. An ambassador will also be sent back to Venezuela. And to the Muslim world, Obama has spoken of his desire for mutually respectful relations, adopted a much more assertive position on Israeli settlements, expunged the phrase “war on terror” from America’s diplomatic lexicon, and issued a directive to close the detention center for “illegal combatants” at Guantanamo Bay. However, the most dramatic reversal – which amounts to a categorical renunciation of his predecessor’s policy – has been Obama’s initiative to engage Iran.

On March 20, the president addressed Iranians directly on the occasion of Nowruz (the Iranian New Year) and stated that he would seek full normalization of relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. He also abjured any intention of promoting regime change and committed himself to comprehensive negotiations without preconditions (meaning the end of any insistence on suspension of uranium enrichment as a precondition for negotiations). Such words and actions have prompted some of Obama’s critics to characterize his policy as soft, if not altogether naive. True, Obama did not have much foreign policy experience before he took office and his domestic record bespeaks a worldview committed to compromise and non-confrontation. But his administration is staffed with officials and advisers who can hardly be described as novices in the ways of the world, and the notion that he is bent on a course of

appeasement is at least premature, if not altogether farfetched. At the same time, efforts to accommodate friends and foes alike have already run into some notable resistance. Friends in Europe have been reluctant to accept detainees to be released from Guantanamo or to increase their contributions to the military effort in Afghanistan; foes, particularly in North Korea, have undertaken nuclear explosive and missile tests that look suspiciously like an exercise in open defiance. The most critical challenge of all, however, will almost certainly be in Iran.

The Iranians have already indulged in slightly more sophisticated variants of North Korean-style defiance, rebuffing requests to engage immediately and insisting that nothing productive could begin until after the Iranian presidential election on June 12. This is not an inconsequential matter, since it earned Iran several more months of interference-free work on their nuclear program, and the hiatus will almost certainly be prolonged by post-election uncertainty. Indeed, Iran's ability to continue exploiting American willingness to engage in order to move its nuclear program toward some kind of definitive breakthrough will be the decisive criterion for determining whether engagement is a more effective strategy than shunning or whether it will ultimately be subject to the same assessment as that of policy under Bush: it did not work.

To avoid the second outcome, the architects of American policy will need to inject content into the amorphous hopes widely invested in engagement. In particular, they will have to:

1. Delineate and prioritize concrete policy objectives, especially with respect to Iranian nuclear capabilities;
2. Specify the inducements they will be prepared to offer in case clarifications of misunderstandings and assurances of good will do not suffice to produce an agreed outcome;
3. Stipulate criteria by which to judge whether or not the process is advancing desired outcomes, or at least continue to promise that it will, i.e., a set of performance benchmarks;
4. Set a timetable or at least a general framework within which objectives must be achieved (because the passage of time is a factor in the Iranian program and a return to the pre-engagement status quo is not an acceptable alternative to successful interaction);

5. Reach some prior understanding with America's most important partners, especially in Europe, about what constitutes a "good faith" effort to achieve a non-coercive resolution; and
6. Prepare a contingency or fallback plan in case engagement is deemed a failure.

There are already some indications that some of these elements of a coherent strategy are being put into place. Secretary Clinton, for example, has stated publicly that if engagement doesn't work, the result will be brutal pressure of a sort that America under Bush was unable to orchestrate but that Obama, seen to have made the effort, would be able to do. Similarly, President Obama has indicated that he expects to be able to make some kind of judgment about the viability of the process by the end of the 2009; some lower-ranking officials have even stipulated the UN General Assembly meeting in late September as the target date. But there is no sign that a comprehensive approach has yet been formulated (not that it would necessarily have been made public if it had) and uncertainty persists about how the administration intends to use engagement as a concrete policy instrument. Moreover, some of the components of an effective policy, especially coordination with and cooperation of European allies who are also major trading partners of Iran, may well be beyond even Obama's capacity to secure, regardless of how open-minded and open-hearted he appears to be.

Some attempt to engage Iran is certainly indicated by the failure thus far of alternative approaches. But engagement stands little chance of success unless all the components of a coherent strategy are worked out, and even then, Obama may still eventually face the dilemma posed by the conclusion that neither engagement nor non-violent coercion will resolve the problem.