



PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

# International Negotiations: A Tool to Serve Our Interests



Hudson Institute



# International Negotiations: A Tool to Serve Our Interests

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During the recent U.S. presidential campaign, much-publicized arguments about negotiating with foreign dictators revealed that Barack Obama and his critics (including Hillary Clinton) all were relying on mistaken assumptions. Obama contended, in effect, that the United States should always be willing to negotiate with problem regimes. He implied that it was a matter of principle with him that he would negotiate directly and without preconditions with hostile foreign governments. Senator Obama's political opponents asserted a conflicting principle: that it is wrong for a U.S. president to sit down with leaders of dangerous hostile regimes involved in terrorism.

Properly understood, however, the question of whether to negotiate, even with morally repugnant adversaries, is a matter of principle. It is a matter of practical



a “nuclear freeze” in the 1980s was another example of a sweet-sounding but self-serving initiative intended to preserve Soviet military advantages while precluding Western steps to counterbalance.

A.

There are special problems in negotiations between democracies and non-democracies. Even if they produce an agreement that is reasonable on its face, there will be differences in the way the parties handle compliance. Those differences can

violation's significance. Some may say it is not their problem. Others will oppose any response involving significant cost or difficulty. Some will contend that the best time for a firm response is not quite yet. And some will resist every proposed sanction until they can declare that it is too late to do anything about the problem.

The history of the twentieth Century provides many proofs that statesmen show far greater interest in negotiating peace and arms control agreements than in enforcing the agreements already on the books. Examples include Hitler's violations of the arms control provisions of the Versailles Treaty; Soviet violations of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the Biological Weapons Convention, and numerous other agreements; and Saddam Hussein's violations of his obligations under the several U.N. Security Council resolutions put in place in 1991 after the Gulf War. In a brilliant analysis written in 1961 for *Foreign Affairs*,<sup>1</sup> Fred C. Iklé warned that Soviet-American arms control could founder on the question of "After Detection—What?"—that is, on the challenge for the United States of taking effective action to counter Soviet cheating after violations are detected. Iklé's warning was prescient, and for years U.S. officials found that they were more firmly bound by U.S. agreements with the Soviet Union than the Soviets were.

Consider the contrast between U.S. and Soviet approaches to compliance with



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an important cost, or “downside,” of engagement. In other words, whatever the case favoring negotiations with such regimes, it should be balanced against the ability of those regimes to exploit the negotiations to consolidate their anti-democratic hold on their countrymen and to influence other countries.

By participating in the Six-Party Talks with North Korea and supporting the European-led negotiations with Iran, the Bush Administration tried pragmatically to stake out middle ground between refusing to negotiate at all and agreeing to give the regimes in Pyongyang and Tehran the prestige of formal bilateral dealings with the United States. Many commentators have urged President-elect Barack Obama to negotiate directly with such adversaries, and especially with the Iranian leaders. The advice is poor when it fails to highlight the political consequences within Iran of any such engagement—and when it fails to credit the U.S. interest in encouraging Iranian workers, students, and women to assert their rights against their country’s unpopular, unsuccessful, and oppressive clerical regime.

### D.

Negotiations may also do more harm than good if they mislead relevant audiences to think that an insoluble problem is in fact solvable, or that a threat can be forestalled when in fact it cannot. In such circumstances, negotiations can create a false sense of security, and distract participants from taking necessary actions of their own.

## III. Conclusion

Officials of the incoming Obama Administration will be reviewing U.S. national security policies across the board. When they ask themselves whether and how they should negotiate with the world’s most troublesome regimes, they will find that simple campaign sound-bites about these questions are of little use.

There is a rich history of how the world’s political leaders have used international negotiations—sometimes for good, and sometimes to facilitate great crimes. The Obama Administration would do well to approach this subject with due respect for this history. Policymaking in this field requires more than invoking abstract principles or bright-line rules about the inherent virtue or evil of talking to enemies.

President Obama will have the duty to weigh the pros and cons of negotiating with hostile regimes, such as that of the clerics who run Iran. In his campaign he





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