

From Bush to Obama: US Policy Towards Iran

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U.S. policy towards Iran under George W. Bush

What were the main features of the Iran policy of U.S. President George W. Bush?

As we all know, the U.S. policy vis-à-vis Iran was marked by a highly confrontational attitude. The very fact that the Bush/Cheney administration decided to “thank” the Iranian government for its crucial assistance in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan by autumn 2001, by naming Iran as part of an “axis of evil” in Bush’s State of the Union address in early 2002, has been a clear indication of the approach preferred towards Iran.

During the Bush II years (but already starting under the Clinton administration), there was tremendous pressure by neoconservative groups outside and inside the administration to effect a “regime change” in Tehran, even to the extent to ask the intelligence services to fabricate evidence for the alleged Iranian “nuclear threat” – stark efforts of political manipulation whose shadows still bear upon the current ties of those institutions as Seymour Hersh describes in his most recent [piece on Iran policy for *The New Yorker*](#).

The neoconservatives who have been occupying the corridors of power in the first Bush II administration had been able to push through their ideas on how to cope with the Iran problem. These were centred around the principle of not talking to a “rogue state” (which in fact was the basis for the total dismissal of Iran’s “grand bargain” offer in the wake of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in spring 2003); an imperial posture that sought to impose a *Diktat* on Tehran on various topics ranging from the nuclear issue (encapsulated in the legally highly problematic and unrealistic demand for Iran to completely halt its nuclear programme) to regional ones (especially in the U.S. war theatres in Iraq and Afghanistan).

It was already during the second mandate of the Bush/Cheney administration that there was an awakening in some U.S. policy circles about the strategic deficiencies of the confrontational, if not belligerent, approach by Washington not only in the Iran question, but also in other theatres across West Asia. After all, the neoconservative-pushed invasions of Afghanistan (in October 2001) and Iraq (in March 2003) had eliminated Tehran’s immediate foes and thus paved the way for Iran’s increasing regional influence, particularly in post-Saddam Iraq and post-Taliban Afghanistan. Together with the deepening of the “Iraqi quagmire” – not least a result of the strength of the resistance there against the U.S.-led occupation –, by the mid-2000s Iran attained the status of an “indispensable nation” for any kind of strategic arrangements in the region – something the neo-cons in their obsession to aggressively confront Iran had been paradoxically the very enablers thereof. Of course, in the run-up to the war on Iraq, many U.S. Realists had warned about the geopolitical consequences of those invasions, but had been quite ignored.

Finally, the Realist camp's comeback came with the December 2006 so-called [Baker-Hamilton report](#), which being the first acknowledgement of U.S. policy failures in Iraq and beyond recommended a new approach involving diplomatic openings towards the formerly designated "rogue states" Iran and Syria in the effort to improve the U.S. status in the region.

In other words, before George W. Bush left office, it was clear that his administration's neoconservative-influenced "don't talk to Iran" stance has not been producing the desired results. Not only was Iran able - even enabled - to increase its regional standing, but its nuclear programme despite heavy pressures was not halted either. In the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, many presidential candidates tried to capitalize on that failure, among them Barack Obama who on some occasions talked about a new Iran policy approach, thus raising hopes of overcoming his predecessor's sabre-rattling posture which pushed the world to the brink of another catastrophic war in that region.

However, it is too easily forgotten that the Bush/Cheney administration's military offensive in the region had in fact enabled the U.S. to establish large, permanent military bases to the immediate east and west of Iran (but of course also in the "Greater Middle East", in Afghanistan and Central Asia with a view on China), thus making Iran's military encirclement by the U.S. complete. This situation, including the increasing militarization of the Persian Gulf, to this day nourishes Tehran's sense of strategic insecurity.

Thus, in a nutshell, the best notion to describe George W. Bush's Iran policy is "coercive diplomacy", a term borrowed from Diplomatic Studies, which signals a policy that majorly relies on punitive measures (economic sanctions, political and military pressures) to force concessions from the other side. As such, the coercive strategy totally perverts the notion of diplomacy which only when exercised in "good faith" can bring about satisfying results to the parties involved.

Needless to say that legally this "coercive" approach is highly problematic - to say the least. Not only has the constant threat of war (being a clear violation of the UN Charter which in its [Article 2\(4\)](#) states that "All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state [...]") been an indispensable feature of the "coercive diplomacy" or "strategy", but the covert operations in Iran, including acts of sabotage and targeted assassinations to put a brake on the nuclear programme need also mentioning, not least because they still go on.

Policy recommendations regarding Iran by U.S. think-tanks

What policy recommendations have leading think-tanks made regarding Iran?

Against that background, the chance of an Obama Administration formulating a much more even-handed approach towards Iran was the key question, also given the proclaimed need for a "course correction". I hence studied the various policy recommendation papers being prepared by old and also newly found think-tanks on the Iran question in the transition period between the Bush II and Obama administrations. Here I tried to identify the most important U.S. think-tanks on Iran and wider Middle East issues, and categorize their recommendations, which led me to list them under the following rubrics:

(1) Neoconservatives and liberal hawks favoured the continuation of the "coercive strategy". This group which among others include the U.S. "Israel Lobby", with its think-tank The

Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), and the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), has de facto been advocating a “roadmap to war” – aptly [described by Jim Lobe](#) –, based on the motto of capitulation or war. Still making alarmist assumptions about the Iranian “nuclear threat” and Tehran’s foreign policy goals in general, they still insist that Iran give up nuclear enrichment within an ultimatum, whose ultimate aim would be to legitimize in the eyes of the public the recourse to war. The logic here is very simple: By making unrealistic demands, the failure of any negotiations is wilfully anticipated, which then, according to the BPC, shall open the way for illegal measures such as an economic blockade and a military attack.

WINEP’s Patrick Clawson has summarized the rationale of such an approach [as follows](#): “The principal target with these offers [to Iran] is not Iran. [...] The principal target of these offers is American public opinion and world public opinion.” In this context Dennis Ross plays a key role as he has been actively involved in, if not at the forefront of, many Iran policy papers. Ross who is known for his advocacy for Israeli interests in Mideast “peace process” negotiations during the Clinton administration, was in February 2009 first appointed “Special Advisor for the [Persian] Gulf and Southwest Asia” for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, then only four months later joined the National Security Council staff as a Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for the “Central Region” (including the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Pakistan and South Asia): Applied to the policy on Iran, his concept of “smart statecraft” stresses the need for “more carrots and more sticks”, very much echoing the approach preferred during the Bush II years, with the “carrots” remaining unspecified, while the “sticks” are being fully deployed. Of course, the Saudi lobby and the wider military-industrial complex ought to be located in this category as well, plus a considerable part of Obama’s administration, including UN Ambassador Susan Rice.

(2) The mainstream élite think-tanks (above all, the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) argued for a more (but not exclusively) *Realpolitik*-based strategy in order to serve U.S. interests in the region, which they believe have not been pursued adequately. They warn against a blind repetition of Bush’s Iran policy which they see as having failed. Instead the U.S. should be ready for engagement with Iran, knowing that this will be time-consuming and arduous. Generally, it is stressed that Iran could be contained, even as a nuclear state.

However, within these “centrist” circles there is a wide range of opinions, even including the “unattractive option” of a preventive strike on Iran, as formulated in an [article](#) in CFR’s *Foreign Affairs* by the Council’s President Richard Haass and the Director of Brookings’ Saban Center for Middle East Policy Martin Indyk.

(3) Moderate circles called for a whole new Iran policy embracing real diplomacy that would also take Iranian security and other interests into account. Countering existing myths about Iranian foreign-policy behaviour (especially when it comes to question of rationality in Tehran’s actions), they make the case for a serious diplomacy and a sustainable engagement with Iran. This group involves many Iran experts and long-standing U.S. diplomats (who e.g. gathered in the American Foreign Policy Project). Indeed they have drawn the right lessons of decades of misleading U.S. policy towards Iran and offer a viable strategy for the future.

U.S. policy towards Iran under Barack Obama

To what extent is President Barack Obama's Iran policy in line with his predecessor's policy and the advice of think-tanks?

The conclusion of my study was that it was unlikely to see a change in Washington's Iran policy under Obama, mainly for the following reasons:

(1) Those advocating the continuation, even deepening of Bush's "coercive strategy" were clearly very much present. During the Bush II years, neoconservative policy-advising circles had been firmly anchored in the policy debates, foremost when it came to the Iran question – an obsession they shared with the U.S. and Israeli governments – where they had acquired some expertise, albeit a very biased one. This sort of institutionalization in the policy-advising sphere has not disappeared with the new administration. In fact, most neocons and "liberal hawks" approved of Obama's designations being a proof of his sense for "continuity", as he not only chose the incumbent Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and his hawkish Democratic Party rival Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State (who during the presidential campaign had promised "tough diplomacy" towards Iran), but he also took over Stuart Levey in the Treasury Department, the man who since 2004 had been in charge of firmly internationalizing the sanctions regime, especially in the field of financial sanctions.

(2) The domestic blockade in the U.S. for a change in the Iran policy still remains intact and is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Of course, fundamental changes to the detriment of U.S. interests, above all a success of the Egyptian revolution or change within Saudi Arabia might trigger a radical new strategic thinking in Washington, which might be in line with what Stephen Kinzer is arguing in his *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future* (New York: Times Books, 2010), i.e. a strategic reorientation of the U.S. towards Turkey and Iran, and to the detriment of Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, we are not likely to see the latter happening anytime soon, as the Israel Lobby, the military-industrial complex and the Saudi Lobby are all powerful and interconnected politico-economic alliances fighting any prospects for a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, and more generally favouring a continuation of militaristic policies in the region.

As to how far Obama's Iran policy is in line with the advice of think-tanks as discussed above, we can foremost mention the still dominant belief in the U.S. – shared by most think-tanks – that Iran must halt its nuclear programme and be deprived of nuclear material for building a bomb. When the nuclear talks were resumed by autumn 2009 around the issue of providing the Tehran Research Reactor with the needed 20% enriched uranium for medical purposes, such a stance informed Washington's strategy aimed at preventing an Iranian nuclear break-out capability. This goal then failed in the face of Tehran's insistence on a simultaneous swap of its low-enriched uranium (LEU) against that higher enriched one. [In brief](#), the talks ultimately failed as a result of [Washington's miscalculated assumption](#) that it

could strike a deal which would ship the bulk of Iran's nuclear material - in fact Tehran's bargaining chip in its talks with great powers - outside the country.

(3) The more general point is the continuing reliance on the "coercive strategy" - or in the language of major powers, the "dual-track approach" - which is still heavily based on the imposition of punitive measures, above all economic and financial sanctions, in the case Iran does not comply with long-established demands such as the halt of the nuclear programme. Now with Russia and China also benefitting from the sanctions regime against Iran, the continuation of that strategy is being favoured. This was starkly witnessed in the negative reactions by all the UN veto powers to the [Brazil- and Turkey-brokered deal with Iran on 17 May 2010](#), basically pointing out that the Iran issue had to be dealt with within the UN Security Council. Three weeks later, the latest round of tightened UN sanctions was imposed on Iran. Hence, for now we are still inside the vicious circle inherent to the "coercive strategy", in which it seems more and more actors are finding their niches to profit from.

As a result, by June 2010, the Iran expert of the Council on Foreign Relations, Ray Takeyh, [observed that](#) "[...] the strategy has shifted from conciliation to coercion." Given the improbability of that strategy to succeed, I think it is high time for the West to contemplate about an Iran policy *beyond* sanctions, which has not only cemented the positions of hardliners on *all* sides, but also block any advancement in the diplomatic stand-off and on wider regional issues of crucial importance to all parties involved.

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Ali Fathollah-Nejad puts the Iran policy of Barack Obama in perspective by also discussing the ideas in this respect of U.S. think-tanks and George W. Bush. He elaborates on his book [The Iran Conflict and the Obama Administration: Old Wine in New Skins?](#) [in German], Potsdam University Press, 2010 & 2011 (reprint).

Praise for the book include: "A detailed and utterly persuasive indictment of US policy towards Iran." Dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, author of "Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic", Hurst 2007 and Columbia University Press 2008; "[...] read with applause. A very thorough and succinct work. [...] nothing important left out." Rudolph Chimelli, veteran journalist and Iran expert, Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany largest daily newspaper).

Interview by Leonhardt van Efferink, editor of ExploringGeopolitics, where it also appeared first under the title "[Iran: Barack Obama, Encirclement, Dual-Track Approach](#)" (September 2011).

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