

# Obama's "carrot and stick" approach to Iran

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The US administration made a much-publicised gesture toward Iran last Friday with the release of a video by President Obama to mark Nowruz, the Persian New Year. While the tone was conciliatory and the presentation slick, the essential strategy remains the "carrot and stick" policy outlined by Obama in his election campaign.

The US president offered Tehran a substantial carrot: the offer of "diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues" and the possibility for "the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations". The reference to the Islamic Republic of Iran—previously avoided by American officials—hinted that "regime change" was off the table and that the US might recognise the state that issued from the 1979 Iranian revolution.

At the same time, Obama made clear that Iran would not achieve its "rightful place... through terror or arms". "Arms" and "terror" are code words for continuing US demands that Tehran abandon its uranium enrichment project and end its support to organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah that have resisted aggression by Israel, America's key ally in the Middle East. And while Obama ruled out threats and offered "honest engagement," the stick of sanctions remains in place and the threat of US military action continue to loom in the background.

Not surprisingly, the response from Tehran has been cautious. Speaking one day after Obama's video address, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei bluntly declared "changes in words are not adequate" and called for changes in US policies and actions. The speech, which was pitched to the regime's close supporters, enumerated all the obstacles to improved relations: three decades of hostility and sanctions, support for Iraq in its war on Iran in the 1980s, and Washington's support for Israel and its crimes.

Khamanei did not, however, shut the door on negotiations. For all its anti-American bluster, the regime represents the interests of the Iranian bourgeoisie and is quite capable of reaching an accommodation with US imperialism, as long as its own strategic and economic interests are enhanced. Tehran quietly assisted in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and has played a key role in stabilising the US occupation of Iraq over the past year by reining in Shiite militias.

One aim of Obama's video appears to be to influence the outcome of Iran's presidential elections in June. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the 2005 elections in part by capitalising on popular outrage at the Bush administration's threats: he pledged to proceed with Iran's nuclear program and ruled out any relations with the US.

Even if Ahmadinejad were replaced by someone more amenable to US overtures, the Iranian president does not have the final say over the country's defence and foreign policy. The US would still have to deal with Khamanei. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, as part of its review of policy toward Iran, the Obama administration is debating whether to send a presidential letter directly to the Iran's Supreme Leader, setting out the basis for negotiations.

Obama's approach does represent a tactical shift from that of the Bush administration. Sections of the American foreign policy establishment backed Obama's election as a means of salvaging US interests from the disaster created by Bush's war in Iraq. Some sort of rapprochement with Iran was regarded as a key element in stabilising the US occupation of Iraq and refocussing Washington's priorities toward Afghanistan, Pakistan and the resource-rich region of Central Asia.

Significantly, the first US diplomatic initiatives toward Iran have been on Afghanistan. For the first time, the US State Department is sending a senior diplomat to Moscow

this week to take part in a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), convened to discuss the anti-occupation insurgency in Afghanistan. The decision opens up the possibility of talks with Iranian representatives, who have observer status at SCO meetings. The SCO was established in 2001 by China and Russia, primarily as a means of countering US influence in Central Asia.

Washington has also invited Iran to participate in a March 31 conference in The Hague, called to address the deepening crisis in US-occupied Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. The gathering would provide an opportunity for US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to meet with Iranian diplomats. Italy has invited Tehran to a meeting of foreign ministers on Afghanistan on the sidelines of the G8 meeting in Trieste in June. Tehran is yet to indicate if it will attend either meeting.

Even on the issue of Afghanistan, however, US and Iranian interests diverge. While asking for Iranian assistance, the US is seeking an accommodation with sections of the anti-occupation insurgency. Any deal that gave a political voice in Kabul to elements of the Taliban would be anathema to Iran, which backed anti-Taliban factions up to 2002. Highlighting US duplicity, Iran's parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani recently declared: "They open the window every morning and shout about terrorism, but then secretly sit down to talk with the Taliban."

A far greater stumbling block is Iran's nuclear program, which Washington claims is aimed at producing nuclear weapons. Tehran insists its nuclear projects are purely for civilian purposes and has adamantly refused to bow to US demands to shut down its uranium enrichment plant and end construction of a heavy water research reactor. Any prospect of a compromise is further complicated by Israel's barely concealed threats to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities to prevent any possibility of Iran countering Israel's own nuclear arsenal. The installation of a right-wing, militarist regime in Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu only heightens the dangers.

A rapprochement with Iran might offer the US certain benefits. In the short term, these include a possible military supply line into Afghanistan as an alternative to the increasingly dangerous routes through Pakistan. In the longer term, Iran is essential to the stability of both Iraq

and Afghanistan. However, any comprehensive US-Iran deal that enhanced Tehran's position would inevitably provoke opposition from US allies in the region—not only Israel, but Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf States.

Like Bush, Obama is not about to compromise on American strategic interests. In case Tehran is not willing to negotiate on US terms, the Obama administration is preparing for confrontation. Obama's video is part of this two-track policy. As the *Wall Street Journal* explained on Saturday: "Mr Obama's words aren't just aimed at Iran—European allies as well as Russia and China are also target audiences. Senior US officials say his administration wants to persuade the world that it is different from President George W. Bush and is going the extra mile to give Iran a chance. If Tehran rebuffs the overtures and sticks to its nuclear program, Washington can more easily seek broad support for coercive measures, such as financial sanctions or even potentially military action, they say."

Even as it is extending an offer of talks to Iran, the US is reassuring allies in the Middle East—above all, Israel—that their interests will be protected. At the same time, Washington is making overtures to Syria—Iran's chief ally in the region—with the object of isolating Tehran prior to punitive sanctions or military action. In the final analysis, while more carefully nuanced and packaged, the Obama administration's policy on Iran is not essentially different from that of its predecessor.

The appointment of the hawkish, pro-Israel Dennis Ross as Obama's special envoy for the Persian Gulf speaks volumes. Ross was closely involved in the preparation of reports on Iran policy last year by two think tanks—the Bipartisan Policy Center and the right-wing Washington Institute for Near East Policy—that mapped out a detailed strategy that led inexorably from the negotiations to military conflict if Iran failed bow to US demands. Ross is in charge of the White House review of Iran policy which is due to conclude this month.



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