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Containing Iran : The Neo-Conservatives and the Obama Approach

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Abstract:

When President Barack Obama made an offer of direct talks with the Iranian regime, he did not expect his overture to be interpreted as a betrayal of the democracy movement. But events following the June 2009 election, which has deepened internal rifts within the Islamic regime and have highlighted a clear schism between the regime and large sections of the population, have presented the Obama administration with a difficult choice. Talking to the regime could be seen as condoning its brutal crackdown on dissidents, while opting for sanctions could serve to bolster support for the embattled regime. Neither option is attractive or would advance US interests in Iran.

The present hard-line leadership in Iran, however, has effectively limited US options by its belligerence. Tehran's failure to accept a compromise deal brokered by Russia and European powers on its enriched uranium has forced the United States to consider sanctions. This is a delicate move as sanctions need to be severe enough to act as a deterrent for the regime; serious enough to persuade Israel that the world is taking the Iranian threat seriously; but not too severe as to handicap an already ailing Iranian economy and hurting the general population. Finding the balance is not an easy task.

Obama's Iran policy appears to be in transition. While the initial overtures focused on engagement, more and more the administration has been forced to take on a more combative tone regarding Iran's obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency. This experience tends to support the neo-conservative critics of Obama, who dismiss the engagement policy as misguided and utopian. The underlying assumption about the congruence of Iranian national interests in the region with that of the United States, which had informed the policy of engagement, is rejected by the neo-conservative commentators. The neo-conservatives have argued that rational calculations do not govern Iranian behaviour; ideology does. The behaviour of the hard-line leadership in Iran to-date, tends to give credence to such criticism.

As a result, the Obama administration is facing growing pressure at home and also in Iran to take a less accommodating position on Iran. This policy shift risks blurring the line separating Obama from his predecessor. What is more, the Bush experience with Iran suggests that a harsher policy does not guarantee success.