



Isolation vs. Engagement
Part 3: Obama, McCain and American Foreign Policy
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DESCRIPTION AND MAJOR POLICY POINTS

Barack Obama and John McCain have very different views about whether and how the United States should negotiate with countries such as Syria, Iran, North Korea, and Cuba. This is the third part in a series of fora on *Isolation vs. Engagement*, the September 9th forum compared and contrasted foreign policy views from the Obama and McCain camps. Such questions raised were: Are the conflicts and challenges in foreign policy more likely to be solved through active diplomatic engagement, or through isolation and sanctions? What are the merits of these different approaches, and what strategy will best serve America's interests? The following are major policy points that emerged from the Forum:

- **General Foreign Policy:** A renewal of diplomatic relations should be a priority for the new administration. In order to succeed at public diplomacy, the new US foreign policy agenda should be bipartisan and strategically address concerns of the foreign parties involved.
- **Middle East/ Israel-Palestine:** US foreign policy should be more humble and sensitive. There is a dignity factor that dictates how the United States is perceived in the Arab and Muslim world. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become “a hot button issue” because it is a metaphor for the humiliation that many in the Middle East feel at the hands of the United States.
- **Afghanistan/Iraq:** More US forces should be sent to Afghanistan. This directly correlates to when Obama and McCain anticipate withdrawing troops from Iraq.
- **Iran:** Iran should be the primary diplomatic challenge for the next president. This issue will not wait because Iran’s uranium enrichment program continues to grow. The next president should signify an early commitment to addressing Iranian diplomatic challenges; but he should also weigh what type of engagement strategy he will employ, such as whether negotiations will be based upon preconditions or not. The proposition of negotiation might test whether Iran is ready to make the psychological transition to enter into diplomatic relations with the United States.
- **Russia:** The United States should discuss with Russia the possibility of cultivating a constructive diplomatic relationship, especially in the interest of building multi-lateral support on the issue of Iran. Should Russia be willing to assist the United States, we would in turn be able to provide support for Russian concerns.

FORUM SUMMARY

John Marks, President of Search for Common Ground, introduced the panelists. The Honorable Steven Bartlett is President of the Financial Services Roundtable. Mr. Bartlett is also a member of Search for Common Ground's US-Syria working group, and serves on the Leadership Group of the US-Muslim Engagement Project. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, a former US Ambassador to Israel, is the Director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.



Panelists: Ambassador Martin Indyk, The Honorable Steven Bartlett, and John Marks (Moderator)

Ambassador Martin Indyk:

The general environment in the Middle East for next the president is bleak. America's "brand name" in the world has been badly tarnished and US military capabilities are strained. We can't afford to fight another war, so our hard power is very visibly constrained. Our soft power as well, which affects others' willingness to work with us. Iran's nuclear enrichment program's proceeding growth has gone unhindered and the clock is ticking. If the next president cannot persuade Iran to stop in the next twelve to eighteen months, Iran will have a stockpile of enriched uranium sufficient for one to three nuclear weapons. In Iraq, progress is fragile. Lebanon is being taken over by Hezbollah and Syria. Hamas may take over the West Bank, in which case it will control two failing statelets. In terms of allies, the geriatric leadership in Saudi Arabia and Egypt is very threatened by Iran's bid at dominance over the Sunni world. The Shiite method is winning the war of ideas over the Sunnis' preference for cooperation.

This must be a period of diplomatic renewal in the Middle East. The era of US dominance is essentially over, and Senator Obama's vigorous diplomacy will be essential to success in the Middle East. A paradox will emerge as a humbler approach could actually increase the United States' influence in the region.

The Iranian challenge will be the first priority for the new president, and Senator Obama will seek a mandate for engagement. He will be part of a broader strategic approach to Iran in regards to lining up the international community to make it clear to Iran that if they want to join the international community they must follow the rules. If not, they will be punished with stricter sanctions. Russia will be key in this effort. This will be a test of whether the United States can have a constructive relationship with Russia. Obama will be cautious and responsibly withdraw troops in Iraq. This will make it clear to Iraqis that it is time for them to begin governing Iraq. As we draw down in Iraq, Iran will be more concerned about us concentrating more on their actions. The troop withdrawal from Iraq will also free us to be more involved with Afghanistan.

Senator Obama will make Middle East peace a much greater priority than President Bush. This is important because Iran has taken advantage of our neglect of the Arab-Israeli situation to gain support. The chance for a two-state solution is slipping away and it is urgent to address the problem before Hamas takes over the West Bank and has full Palestinian control. The same argument applies to Syria and the indirect Israeli-Syrian

negotiations in Ankara. Until now, there is no history of the United States not being willing to play honest broker during Middle East peace negotiations. US policy is currently isolating Syria rather than bringing it over to the peace camp. Obama will join in those negotiations because Syria is Iran's conduit into the arena of Israeli-Palestinian politics. He would help Palestinians by placing pressure on those groups supported by Syria to follow Syria's lead in making peace with Israel.

Across the board, Obama will pursue more vigorous and strategic diplomacy in the Middle East.

The Honorable Steve Bartlett:

Where is McCain in this equation? I know Senator John McCain personally and his foreign policy stance is not clear. What is clear is that it is not fully aligned with either President Bush or Al Gore. *Isolation versus Engagement* is not a central part of the McCain campaign, except in the cases of Iran and the surge in Iraq.

What do we know of McCain's foreign policy? Senator McCain supports the surge in Iraq. He learned about the need for necessary force during his time in Vietnam. Concerning Russian expansionism and the recent Georgia situation, McCain was more alarmed than most other politicians. McCain sets his own course on foreign policy. He believes in retaining military force as an option but as a last resort. We should have a strong military so we do not have to use it. Senator McCain, like most Americans, however, does recognize that the Islamic terrorist threat is real.

But what to do about it? McCain as president would take longer than Obama to exit Iraq, but he would eventually do so while maintaining enough forces there to keep chaos at bay. Iran will be the first major test of the new president and is akin to the Cuban Missile Crisis. McCain as president would not engage directly with Iran without preconditions, but he would be forceful in engaging allies to place stronger economic pressure on Iran. Russian nationalism and expansionism is another threat that has yet to be dealt with.

Hopefully, whoever the new president is will take up the mantle of public diplomacy.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

John Marks

Q: What do you see as the main areas of difference between Obama & McCain?

Martin Indyk

A: Public diplomacy, in essence, can only succeed if the policy we're trying to sell is intelligible and addresses the concerns of those we're trying to win over. In that regard, the Bush Administration did a terrible job. Why? The Palestinian issue is a hot button issue for much of the Arab and Muslim world because it is a metaphor for the humiliation that many in the Middle East feel at the hands of the United States. Neglecting that issue for seven years has had major impact, which President Bush has finally recognized, but he lacks serious conviction to address. There is no indication that McCain as president will make it a priority, and every indication that Obama will because he understands its importance.

There is a battle going on within the McCain campaign, as some key foreign policy advisors do not consider the Palestinian issue a priority. Senator McCain thinks democracy in the Middle East is more important, which is not so different from Bush's position. It puts focus in the wrong place.

In terms of Syria, McCain's advisors say he will not negotiate with Syria. The Bush Administration's preconditions for talks with Iran precluded negotiations and allowed Iran to pursue uranium enrichment. Senator McCain wants to set more constructive preconditions. Senator Obama wants to discuss with Iran about ceasing its uranium enrichment program rather than setting that as a precondition. Even if that strategy does not work, he will have shown that he did what he could and there would be wider support for any ensuing sanctions.

Steve Bartlett

A: Senator McCain has more experience and he holds both allies and adversaries accountable for their part of a bargain. He will engage with adversaries, but engagement must have a concrete goal. Neither candidate has really committed to engaging in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict early on, but hopefully either candidate would take it up during first two years of his presidency. The measure of McCain's presidency will be his ability to engage in six different foreign policy arenas at once.

John Marks

Q: What are the areas of common ground between the candidates?

Martin Indyk

A: Iran, even though the candidates will deal with it differently, will have to be a priority. In Afghanistan, both candidates agree that we need to send more forces and make it a priority. In Iraq, there is more common ground than you would think, and Senator Obama is not wedded to a fixed timetable for withdrawal.

We don't know exactly where Senator McCain will come out on these issues, but he places a high priority on promoting democracy around the world. He tends to see the Middle East through that lens so he is critical of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. But to turn back Iran's influence through that strategic lens is not the most constructive approach to win over potential allies.

Steve Bartlett

A: Senator McCain sees democracy promotion in a much more sophisticated way than President Bush in terms of the development of civil society. In the beginning, both candidates will be drawn into domestic issues, i.e. the economy, but both will have to devote a great deal of time to foreign policy, perhaps more than they anticipate or wish.

John Marks

Q: In terms of foreign policy, take a tour of the people around the candidates and their influence.

Steve Bartlett

A: Senator Lieberman, Colin Powell, and Henry Kissinger are McCain's peer advisors regarding foreign policy. McCain's current staff members tend to be strong Neocons, but McCain may change advisors if elected president. McCain has a small staff, so the lack of older Realist Republicans, such as former President George W.H. Bush, is not so significant. He just does not surround himself with a lot of people.

Martin Indyk

A: Anthony Lake and Susan Rice are Obama's main foreign policy advisors. Teams of 300 people in various working groups. The entire foreign policy establishment of the Democratic Party, including Madeline Albright, Bill Perry, Lee Hamilton, and Richard Holbrook, is available to Obama. Daniel Kurtzer and Dennis Ross are the most critical players concerning Middle East policy.

One thing holds true from administration to administration. Democrats fight over turf, but not over ideology. On the other hand, Republicans have deep disagreements along Realist vs. Neocon lines and both have a role in McCain campaign. McCain has a foot in each camp, but right now Neocons, such as Randy Scheunemann, Randall Sherman, and Bob Kagan, are McCain's "foot soldiers."

John Marks

Q: What would you tell the new president about in a briefing regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict?

Martin Indyk

A: In terms of developing the Middle East strategy, it will have to be bipartisan. It takes about six months for an administration to get in gear, but this won't wait six months. I would tell either president to find a way to launch two initiatives—one towards Iran to suspend uranium enrichment and one towards Israel and Palestine/Syria. The next president must signal an early commitment to these initiatives to enable the other work he will have to do both in the Middle East and in other areas abroad and domestically.

Steve Bartlett

A: McCain could start engaging in the Middle East right off the bat since he already has relationships over there.

John Marks

Q: With the domestic financial meltdown, how will it impact foreign policy?

Steve Bartlett

A: Wars are fought when they need to be fought. They are not based on the budget, but based on need. There is good news in regards to the economy. In 6 months, we will be able to look back on today as a turning point in the economic recovery. The economic problems in the United States, which affect everything, are eighty percent due to the housing crisis and twenty percent due to energy constraints. So the government's intervention regarding Fanny Mae & Freddie Mac will make the economy less of a burning issue.



Panelists answering the audience's questions

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR**Jim Vitarello**

Q: How important is Jerusalem to candidates vis-à-vis resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Martin Indyk

A: All candidates have to swear devotion to an undivided Jerusalem, but once elected that often that. McCain says he will move the US embassy to Jerusalem (as President Bush said he would do also). The reality for either presidential candidate is that he will inherit a final status negotiation and Jerusalem is an issue for final status negotiations. No US president could preempt those negotiations by moving the embassy to Jerusalem.

Steve Bartlett

A: No US president will agree to anything that would jeopardize access to Jerusalem, but details have to be decided in negotiations.

Zhu Chen

Q: How will human rights violations against Palestinians be addressed?

Steve Bartlett

A: A precondition to resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that Palestinians must be treated with more respect than they have been thus far. And a precondition to widespread peace in the Middle East is resolution, or at least stabilization, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Martin Indyk

A: I disagree about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict being a precondition for resolution of other conflicts, but it is still crucial to US interests. There is a dignity and humiliation factor that has a great bearing on how the United States is perceived in Arab/Muslim world. If we are to succeed, we need to be much more sensitive.

Bill Zartman

Q: Could an engagement strategy change how the United States is perceived in Iran?

Martin Indyk

A: I don't know. Putting all issues on the table is a way of signaling sincerity, which would test whether Iran is ready to make the psychological transition. Now Iranian hard-liners are the ones who want to engage with the United States. A direct channel exists between the United States and Iranian ambassadors in Iraq, but has not yet been effectively exploited. The idea of normalizing relations with the United States is very popular among Iranian people.

Still, the Iranian nuclear program is also popular, so they may try to stall negotiations until their nuclear power becomes a *fait accompli*. Iranian elections are also coming up, which could also affect Iran's relationship with the United States. By the time we have a new president, our options could be severely narrowed.

Steve Bartlett

A: The United States is popular among Iranian people, but the nuclear reality must still be dealt with.

Tom Dine

Q: What is Russia's role in the Middle East? How will the next administration deal with expansionist Russia?

Steve Bartlett

A: McCain would invite Russia to participate in the Middle East, or make them stay out.

Martin Indyk

A: Obama would adopt a similar posture, as evident from his condemnation of Russia regarding Georgia. But Russia is a critical player regarding Iran. The broader context in which we have been demanding Russian cooperation with Iran also saw us ignoring their concerns about Georgia. We need to engage with Russia more fully and have a serious conversation about whether and how we can have a constructive relationship. When it comes to Iran, it is essential that conversation with Russia takes place. Whether or not they cooperate with us will in turn affect whether and how we support them in their concerns.

Obama engenders tremendous excitement abroad, partly because many in Middle East really believe that he's a Muslim. They will be very receptive to a President Obama, at least initially. That would give US diplomacy a considerable advantage and constrain Ahmadinejad's animosity towards us.