CHANGE
WE CAN BELIEVE IN
Is He Serious About Engagement? Why Obama Should Honor His Campaign Pledges
By Mel Gurtov

The beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency raised high hopes that the US would adopt a policy of engaging adversaries such as North Korea and Iran, particularly given Obama’s repeated promises in his campaign speeches.

But more than a year into office, Obama has so far failed to take the only approach that holds a real promise of success, argues US political scientist Mel Gurtov.

WHEN BARACK OBAMA was campaigning to be the next US president, engaging enemies was a cardinal element of his foreign policy platform. So much so that candidate Hillary Clinton criticized him for being naïve about Iran and other “rogue states.” But Obama persisted — rightly, in my view — and engagement found its place in the professed foreign policy of the new administration.

But how dutifully is the administration practicing engagement? Genuine engagement means rival or enemy states are dealt with in ways that show acceptance of their legitimacy for purposes of negotiation and a willingness to work cooperatively for mutual benefit. Incentives to keep talking and reach agreement take precedence over threats. Engagement is not the same as carrots and sticks or so-called limited engagement, in which the opponent is faced with an “engage or else” posture, or is promised rewards only after demonstrating good behavior. Threats of punishment if offers to engage are not accepted, far from being part of an engagement strategy, actually undermine it. The consistency of the message is crucial. Engagement is not a trial balloon. Thus, when Dennis McDonough, a senior National Security Council adviser to Obama, said that “engagement should be judged as a means to an end, not as a policy goal itself,” he was right, but only up to a point. Engagement is indeed a means to an end — improved prospects for peace and mutual security — but it is the process that counts. Trust-building is the constant aim, to be pursued to the point where it is clear that reciprocity either will or won’t result. As the Chinese say, qiutong cunyi: seek common ground while reserving differences.
In the Obama administration, promise and performance have not meshed when it comes to engagement, with the likely result that its policy objectives in Iran and North Korea will not be realized. When the president addressed the United Nations on September 23, he said he was “committed to diplomacy” with Iran and North Korea. But a moment later, he warned that if those countries “ignore international standards” and pursue nuclear weapons, “they must be held accountable.” Secretary of State Clinton later warned that “crippling” sanctions would be forthcoming.

Aside from ignoring the nuclear weapons of India, Pakistan and Israel, these positions are likely to be received in Iran and North Korea as guns to the head. Neither the Iranians nor the North Koreans are going to respond to diplomatic overtures that are coupled with threats of punishment, real or implied. There is too much history in each case to justify expectations of happy acceptance of American (or anyone else’s) terms for talking.

To its credit, the Obama administration has held out a friendly hand to Iran’s government. It has offered direct talks for the first time, avoided interfering when tainted elections led to widespread protests, and accepted the idea of providing Iran with nuclear fuel once it has sent the bulk of its enriched uranium out of the country. But in the view of Iranian officials, there are two missing ingredients. One is that the US should consider what Iran wants to negotiate and not just its own demands. It’s a “two-way street” or nothing, the Iranian foreign minister has said. He cited a number of outstanding issues that could be negotiated in addition to Iran’s nuclear program: trade, the global recession, regional conflicts, and international disarmament. The other issue is more fundamental: trust. Mohamed ElBaradei, the recently departed head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said there was “total distrust on the part of Iran” that it would get back the nuclear fuel once it shipped out enriched uranium. If the fuel deliveries can be “guaranteed,” ElBaradei said, the way would be open for “direct engagement between Iran and the US. There is no other way.”

With North Korea, the administration continues to appeal to Pyongyang, along with China and other parties, to rejoin the Six-Party talks and abandon further weapons tests. It now appears that North Korea will return to the talks, in return for US agreement to direct talks with the North. Again, however, the deal-breaker is that the Americans “balance” engagement with containment: sanctions and warnings of dire consequences. As Secretary Clinton said in a speech on October 29 last year, “North Korea’s return to the negotiating table is not enough. Current sanctions will not be relaxed until Pyongyang takes verifiable, irreversible steps toward complete denuclearization. Its leaders should be under no illusion that the United States will ever have normal, sanctions-free relations with a nuclear armed North Korea.” That statement plays well in Washington, but the message of engagement is bound to be lost on North Korea’s leaders.

North Korea’s motives and objectives are not very different from Iran’s. Like Iran, it wants ironclad security guarantees, international legitimacy and the means of pursuing its own course of economic development. The North’s nuclear weapons have essentially defensive purposes: an attention-getter, a bargaining card, and a deterrent against US attack. The path to North Korean security goes through Washington; but both distant and recent history have taught this regime that only a “legally binding non-aggression treaty” (as Kim Jong-il said in 2003 at the first round of Six-Party talks), and not mere declarations, will lead to the denuclearization Washington seeks. After all, the same Obama who promised at Prague in April 2009 to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy” also promised, in the Joint Vision Statement with South Korea’s President Lee Myung-bak, to maintain “extended [nuclear] deterrence” against North Korea. This contradiction can only deepen North Korea’s insecurities.

Sanctions will not work against North Korea or Iran. Far from bringing either government to heel, they are likely to strengthen militant nationalism, undermine those around the leadership group who believe in testing US intentions, and increase the attractiveness of having a nuclear-weapon option. The Obama administration seems to under-

stand that sanctions cannot be the end game. As Secretary Clinton acknowledged with reference to Burma, sanctions “have not produced the results that had been hoped for.” But she then declared: “Engagement versus sanctions is a false choice, in our opinion, so going forward, we will be employing both those tools.” But maintaining sanctions while trying to persuade the Burmese junta to hold genuine elections and release Aung San Suu Kyi is very unlikely to succeed. (The junta’s recent willingness to allow a senior US State Department official to visit Suu Kyi is a welcome sign, but it hardly qualifies as a victory for diplomacy.) The choice is to engage Burma or punish it; trying to do both simultaneously will not work. Likewise with Iran and North Korea.

Such two-track engagement also loses credibility with governments friendly with adversaries such as China and Russia. Their world view does not coincide with Washington’s, and even though a nuclear North Korea or a nuclear Iran poses potentially serious problems for each, they are not about to join a US-led bandwagon to confront these regimes — first, because they have extensive economic interests to protect, and second, because they are seeking to create a loosely organized rejectionist front for states that fear a US-dominated world order. In short, regime change is not in Beijing’s or Moscow’s lexicon, whereas engagement is. On North Korea, for instance, the Chinese have made plain numerous times that so long as the parties keep talking, their role as a broker in a nuclear deal will continue.

Beyond direct US talks with Iran and North Korea, there are other courses of action worth taking. The sudden softening of North Korea’s external relations — marked by ex-President Bill Clinton’s securing of the release of two American reporters, exchanges of family visits between North and South Korea, release of four South Korean fishermen, and resumption of activity at the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Mt. Kumgang tourist area — provides an opening for crafting a comprehensive security and long-term economic development proposal with Pyongyang in the course of the Six-Party talks. Serious discussion of a mechanism for a Northeast Asia se-
security dialogue, an idea favored by all six parties, ought to occur. In direct talks with North Korea, Washington might indicate readiness to establish full diplomatic relations and sign a peace treaty, both long overdue, and reiterate the vow to end “hostile intent” between the two countries that was made by President Clinton and Vice Marshall Jo Myong Nok in a joint communiqué in October 2000.

Though Iran backed away from the idea of sending its enriched uranium outside the country for processing and opening its previously hidden enrichment site to international inspection, negotiating opportunities on these matters are by no means lost. Even the recent headline-grabbing IAEA report that Iran may have been working for some time on a nuclear warhead does not conclude that Iran is all that close to having one. Obama’s own top advisers have been quoted as saying that Iran’s enrichment capabilities still put it several years away from having a bomb. Thus, rather than keep pushing for stronger sanctions and talking (as Secretary Clinton has) about using the nuclear issue to create a regional anti-Iran alliance, it would make sense to focus on incentives for Iran to change course. Chief among them would be security assurances against Israeli as well as US attack, and the resumption of trade and investment.

None of these ideas promises a final resolution of the nuclear-weapon issue; nor do they eliminate resort to sanctions if it turns out that Iran or North Korea is simply looking for ways to buy time. But they are ideas worth exploring, and warrant positive gestures on the US side. While the parties are seeking common ground, however, warnings should be avoided and guns should not be on the table.

The greatest obstacle to agreement in all these cases probably lies within the realm of domestic politics. For one thing, attempts by one government to influence another’s politics — such as the Obama administration’s reported strategy to “drive a wedge” between the hardline Iranian leadership and the popular opposition — is likely to founder on the shoals of nationalism. Within countries, democratic or dictatorial, moreover, there are always going to be forces at work to frustrate peace efforts. It may be that no incentive structure can be devised that can overcome entrenched resistance to engagement, for the simple reason that engagement with “the enemy” is itself a threat — to careers, budgets, and reputations, for instance. Yet history demonstrates that strong, determined leaders — think Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon — are capable of sidelining engagement’s opponents and crafting win-win agreements.

Unless the US restores Obama’s promise of a new realism that embraces an engagement strategy, it is in danger of again becoming isolated internationally. The Chinese will not support painful sanctions against North Korea, Iran, or any other country; their own economic and other interests dictate urging continued talking. The Russians and Europeans seem willing to go along with the US on targeted sanctions in the case of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, but without much conviction that sanctions will produce compliance. Absent the wholehearted support of all these parties, sanctions will not only lack punch; they are more likely to make the US appear as the lonely superpower. So, regardless of how indignant and frustrating it may be to deal with North Korean bellicosity, Iranian duplicity, and Burmese repression, there is only one alternative: patient and persistent efforts to reach agreements that provide incentives for further, deeper cooperation. As ElBaradei has said with specific reference to Iran, “trust and confidence-building are an incremental process that requires focusing on the big picture and a willingness to take risks for peace.”

Mel Gurtov is Professor Emeritus of Political Science in the Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, and Visiting Professor of Political Science at the University of Oregon, Eugene. His most recent book is Global Politics in the Human Interest (5th revised edition; Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007). An earlier version of this article appeared on our website under the Global Asia Forum.