Engaging Enemies: Fraught With Risk, Necessary for Peace

By Mel Gurtov

In authoritarian and democratic states alike, the idea of engaging enemies or adversaries in order to achieve peaceful international relations is often risky, because if engagement fails, leaders may be perceived both at home and abroad as weak, or even worse, naïve. But as Mel Gurtov argues, the pursuit of engagement may be the best hope for resolving thorny challenges posed by countries such as North Korea and Iran.

IN A WORLD DOMINATED by power politics, rivalry between states and the narrow pursuit of national interests typically trump collaboration and peacemaking. To speak the language of engagement is to risk ridicule or worse. Nevertheless, engagement is or can be an aspect of national security strategy, an honorable path to peaceable relations with adversaries. Knowing that coercion fails more often than it succeeds,1 we need to devise strategies for engagement rather than more credible, and dangerous, ways to threaten and punish.

Engagement is a process more than a policy. As one of President Barack Obama’s foreign-policy advisers reportedly said, “Engagement should be judged as a means to an end, not as a policy goal itself.”2 Those means involve reaching out to the other side in a variety of ways that may catalyze new directions for policy — one’s own and the rival state’s — with the aim of reducing tensions and establishing a co-operative, mutually beneficial relationship. It does not entail sanctifying or otherwise rewarding a particular government. But it does mean respecting the rival state’s leaders, giving assurances of security from threat, and most importantly, providing an opportunity to benefit from the changed relationship through “sufficient and credible” inducements.3 In all, engagement seeks to create the space for resetting relationships.

To be effective (i.e. persuasive to the other side), engagement should be undertaken strategically, as a calculated use of incentives with the expectation of an improved security situation for both sides. Engagement invites reciprocity, thus setting in motion a succession of positive changes in policy and outlook quite opposite from the ladder of escalation that characterizes all too many international conflicts. Engagement is not carrots and sticks, where one side offers an adversary the chance to benefit while holding over it the threat of punishment if it fails to accept or reciprocate the offer. When a government announces a policy of engagement toward a particular foe while also threatening, or carrying out, sanctions, it is practicing coercive diplomacy, not engagement.4 Such a policy is very unlikely to be perceived positively by a rival state’s leaders, particularly if — as in the case of the US approaches to Iran and North Korea — the rival state is vastly inferior militarily and sees nuclear weapons as a great equalizer.

While engagement may include negotiating, they are not the same thing. Often, the purpose of negotiating is to promote a winning strategy. Engagement, however, does not aim at winning; it is about finding common ground in order to achieve peaceful international relations. Engagement invites reciprocity, thus setting in motion a succession of positive changes in policy and outlook quite opposite from the ladder of escalation that characterizes all too many international conflicts.

Yet I do propose engagement when dealing with some dictators and authoritarian governments, such as those in North Korea and Iran. What’s the difference between these two countries and outright renegade states that don’t merit engagement? The leaders of these governments are autocrats or worse, and the North Korean regime’s gulag puts it in a class by itself. But their international conduct, however provocative, often arises out of a strong sense of external threat from the US and its allies that motivates their pursuit of nuclear weapons. Moreover, unlike Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, for example, the leaders of North Korea and Iran seem open to compromise so long as it enhances their international acceptance and, above all, regime security. Engagement therefore holds out hope of reaching agreements that might, in return for security assurances, improve life for their people and constrain their nuclear-weapons ambitions.

Engagement is not an easy strategy. It requires persistence, patience, ingenuity, and a tough skin for dealing with critics, at home as much as — perhaps even more so than — abroad. Like other forms of diplomacy, such as negotiation and mediation, engagement relies on credibility, flexibility and other qualities that enable access to the other side and the opportunity to talk. Engagement consists of not taking “no” as a final answer. As agonizing as debating and bargaining may be, and as frustrating as a lack of firm agreements may be, talking itself has its own rewards. Achieving incremental agreements, inculcating the “habit of dialogue,” and gaining mutual respect between individual negotiators is not small achievements. In the end — though this is by no means certain — breakthroughs small and large

### Examples of Possible Engagement Initiatives

**Economic Inducements**
Includes aid, removal of trade barriers, energy assistance

**Formal Agreements**
Includes diplomatic recognition

**Informal Agreements**
Non-binding agreements, e.g. pledges and codes of conduct

**Trade-Offs**
Quid pro quos, e.g. territorial or prisoner swaps

**CBMs and CSBMs**
Confidence- and security-building measures: hot lines, troop pullbacks or redeployments, transparency measures

**Functional Arrangements**
Joint projects, e.g. data-sharing and construction

**Exchanges**
E.g. cultural, educational, sports and scientific information sharing

**Symbolic Gestures**
Apologizing, avoiding offensive language or actions, eliminating stereotyping

**Third-Party Brokering**
Using a third country to mediate or act as a communication channel; or using an international organization to adjudicate, such as by fact-finding, truth and reconciliation, or court determination

**Civil Society**
Encouraging NGOs and businesses to contribute to a country's development

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are possible, perhaps more possible than if pressure tactics are used. Much can be learned in this regard from the confidence-building process used by the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the so-called ASEAN Way.

### MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

As mentioned, a chief purpose of engaging enemies is to promote mutual security, which may result in strengthening the security of still others. Difficult, unpredictable relations need to be put on a businesslike, stable, reciprocal basis, with the parties’ common understanding that adherence to mutually acceptable rules will bring shared (but not necessarily the same or equal) benefits. Shared experiences in these areas should create positive grounds for wider ties at various levels, from transactions between individuals and civil-society groups (Track III) to non-governmental and official exchanges (Tracks I and II).

Engagement is not a one-size-fits-all activity. It may take place in different formats — unilateral, bilateral and multilateral — under the three tracks. The panel on the opposite page lists the kind of initiatives that might be used. Many of the actions mentioned amount to incentives to engage. But there is no guarantee that one side's best intentions will be received as such. Historical animosities, among other factors, often create exceptional difficulties when it comes to one set of leaders believing in the engagement efforts of an adversary. Belief requires developing a trusting relationship, and as Nicholas J. Wheeler has written, this requires that one side expose its vulnerability by taking a risk for peace in order to demonstrate trustworthiness. Unilaterally reducing or redeploying one’s forces or weapons, for example, or stopping aid to an ally while unconditionally providing aid to an adversary might demonstrate good faith by reducing one’s security and increasing the security of the rival country. Still, how the other side perceives such initiatives will depend on that leadership's priorities. It also depends, as Wheeler reminds us, on how effectively influential domestic players who might sabotage a trust-building initiative are sidelined.

### PRACTICING ENGAGEMENT

The case of North Korea provides further food for thought about an engagement strategy. Consider these factors:

Authoritarian regimes are notoriously insecure, always looking for enemies within as well as outside. Reassurances of their security and legitimacy are important. These may consist of negative assurances (we will not attack you; we do not threaten your survival) and positive assurances (we are willing to grant you diplomatic recognition; we will assist your economic development).

The US has mainly relied on negative assurances with North Korea, whereas South Korea, at least under the liberal governments of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, emphasized positive assurances.

Top-level, high-visibility engagement is essential. Consider Kim’s and Roh’s summit diplomacy with North Korean leaders, Jimmy Carter’s unsponsored talks with Kim Il Sung in 1994, and President Bill Clinton’s dispatch of Defense Secretary William Perry and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang.

Co-operative partners are often needed to bro-ker talks; countries (such as China in the case of the two Koreas) that can provide incentives or rewards for agreement to proceed with talks, and that have a reasonably good working relationship with both sides to a dispute.

Co-operative structures may also be needed — multilateral groups of varying combinations representing several countries (as in Track II forums on Northeast Asia’s security) that can discuss win-win possibilities on behalf of the contending par-

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Engagement is not an act of charity or a weak-kneed attempt to postpone the inevitable; it is a course of action chosen because of its expected benefits. Adversaries need to be aware of the opportunity costs of rejecting engagement.

Unilateral acts to engage an adversary must at some point be reciprocated. If only for domestic political reasons, engaging an unfriendly state has a time limit; the political opposition and public opinion may not tolerate unreciprocated generosity for very long, least of all when a dispute has cost lives or when a government has developed a well-earned reputation for repressing its citizens. This raises one of the biggest barriers to engagement: the domestic political environment in both involved countries. Enemies of engagement abound — in the political opposition, in journalistic circles, in a nationalistic public, in the military and in a country’s own dominant party or faction. These opponents may go to great lengths to undermine engagement policies — and their ability to do so is at least as great as the ability to reach out to the other side.

The treacherous politics of engagement may be illustrated by US policy toward China. President Richard Nixon got away with normalizing relations with China because the strategy of befriending “the enemy of my enemy” (the Soviet Union) made sense to the US public, many members of Congress and later the business community. Presidents since Nixon have all engaged China to one degree or another, and have had public support for doing so. But that has not been the case with Cuba, North Korea and Iran. These and other authoritarian states are easy targets for domestic critics, who can count on the US public and NGOs, left and right, to support tough policies. Unlike China, these other authoritarian governments lack a strong US domestic constituency to argue their case. Thus Obama, like his predecessors, has the very difficult task of “proving” that engaging these regimes is in the national interest. One must remember that the object of engagement also has its critics, officials who regard engagement as a sellout of national interests. We can be sure that there are plenty of Chinese, North Korean, Iranian and Cuban officials and analysts who want to prevent a closer relationship with the US or the West. It doesn’t take much to upset engagement efforts: an incident at sea, an unintended diplomatic slight, a military exercise, a critical comment on the country’s leadership or a dispute over military capabilities. Critics will always have the upper hand when political leaders are embarking on a new course that involves setting aside old stereotypes.

US relations with North Korea since the accession of Kim Jong Un illustrate the difficulties. A “Leap Day Deal” on Feb. 29, 2012, promised renewed international inspection of North Korea’s nuclear facilities in return for US humanitarian aid. But then North Korea launched a rocket with the announced aim of putting a satellite into orbit, and the deal was off. The Obama administration reverted to the old policy of sanctions and disengagement. The rocket launch also ensured that there would be no debate about North Korea policy in the US presidential race. The North Koreans responded with a third nuclear-weapon test. When US intelligence reportedly discovered early in 2013 that North Korea had developed a new mobile missile, The New York Times wrote that “everything [the Obama administration has] tried in the past four years to lure the country out of isolation … has largely failed.” The point, however, is that the administration had not “tried everything,” certainly not everything important to the North Koreans, in large part because of US domestic political considerations.

These and many other cases raise important questions about how to evaluate engagement. When is engagement successful or failing? When should it be pushed further or abandoned? Should engagees “give peace a chance,” and if so, for how long? Or should they join those who say, “We’ve had enough,” when the other side appears truculent? Should a powerful country engage a weak country in a different manner than a strong one? Do sanctions and other pressure tactics have a role in an engagement strategy? Do the activities across the three tracks need to be orchestrated so as not to contradict one another? And can they be orchestrated? Are Track II and III activities as useful as Track I activities? Are goodwill gestures and symbolic acts sufficient to demonstrate good intentions?

On the other hand, if a country repeatedly rejects incentives to talk, or takes actions that suggest it has no interest, has engagement therefore failed, or have the promises not been credible enough? Conversely, if those same responses to engagement clear the way for tough actions, such as sanctions, should engagement be judged a success (because it brought out the other side’s true motives) or a failure (because it proved naïve)? These are not academic questions; in the real world, they may make the difference between war and peace.