The core meaning of constructive engagement lies in the role that domestic politics plays in a country that wishes to engage an adversary, as well as in those countries being engaged.

Miroslav Nincic dissects this dynamic in the ongoing efforts by the United States to craft an effective foreign policy toward North Korea and Iran.

**THE CHOICE OF FOREIGN POLICY**

The outcomes the policies produce must be understood in the context of the political conditions on both sides of the relationship. A grasp of these conditions provides the foundation for understanding the feasibility of an alternative approach to dealing with those countries the United States deems its enemies.

**THE MEANS AND ENDS OF FOREIGN POLICY**

The purpose of foreign policy is to induce other nations to do what they might otherwise not do. Its tools, therefore, imply leverage over the preferences and actions of other nations. These tools can be arrayed along a continuum from the least to the most coercive — at one end are tools aimed at countries with which relations are amicable, at the other end are coercive measures reserved for those considered adversaries. The former choice is more easily justified than the latter, because it is far from apparent that threats and punishments are the only or best way of dealing with perceived adversaries. By my calculations, US military threats and interventions in the post-World War II period have achieved their aim only about 40 percent of the time (Nincic 2011, Chapter 1); for economic sanctions, the record is far worse (e.g., Pape 1997). In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, punitive measures often reinforce the very behavior they are intended to discour-

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1. To simplify exposition, I will assume that we are dealing with a bilateral relationship.
2. Here, I focus on the task of altering intentions rather than constraining capabilities.
tance to Egypt to encourage continued adherence to the Camp David peace principles.

From the viewpoint of the nation offering inducements, their value must be at least equivalent to that of the counter-gesture demanded, but this is rarely possible where bilateral relations are marked by uncompromising hostility and mutual vilification (major US-Soviet arms-control treaties, for example, were inconceivable at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s). It is typically demanded that the other side abandon some pursuit that it considers central to its interests, or that it alter foreign policy priorities on the part of regimes that, in their essentials, have nevertheless survived.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY

The dominant goal of most governments is to maintain their grip on power, which ultimately requires the support of powerful national constituencies. Consequently, foreign policy must reflect the interests and values of those constituencies. Barring major changes in the external challenges facing a country, a modified foreign policy is usually traceable to some change in domestic political conditions, especially in the nature of the constituencies that the regime must court. Catalytic carrots must be evaluated with this in mind.

I refer to the constituencies that initially brought the regime to power and thereafter supported its rule as its traditional constituencies. For countries such as North Korea and Iran, the associated elites tend to be inward-looking, satisfied with a relatively isolated existence and favoring hardline approaches to relations with the outside world. Their core is composed of those at the helm of regime ideology and its coercive machinery. They are intensely nationalistic, adhering to apparently unshakeable core beliefs and view much of the outside world as a threat that must be deterred or countered by military means. In the case of Iran, traditional supporters have included the clerical elite and, very quickly thereafter, elements of the state’s coercive apparatus, especially the Revolutionary Guards. In the case of North Korea, the traditional constituency has involved the Korean Workers’ Party and, above all, the country’s military leadership. Inevitably, foreign policy choices reflect the preferences of such elites.

When the support of traditional backers secures the regime’s position, the government has no reason to abandon policies that coincide with the priorities of its backers. If, however, signs of political instability indicate that the nexus of government policies with key-constituency interests may no longer keep the regime in place, new paths to domestic support must be sought; now meaningful policy changes become possible, assuming conducive international conditions.

MAPPING OUT OPTIONS

An adversary government whose position appears tenuous has several options. It may attempt to shore up support from traditional elites whose reinvigorated backing may keep it in power (Strategy T, in the table below). If that support is unavailable or insufficient, the other approach is to seek the backing of alternative, previously disenchanted constituencies whose endorsement may now make the decisive difference (Strategy A). In turn, nations trying to influence that country’s behavior (e.g. the United States) also have two options: continued reliance on negative pressures (Strategy N), or else a shift to positive engagement (Strategy P).

Reinvigorate traditional support (Strategy T): From the US perspective, the shortest path to the least desirable outcomes is to tighten punitive screws as the adversary regime seeks to bolster the support of traditional elites (Outcome T). When a country is externally beleaguered, the priorities of elites that supported the very policies we wish to change are most powerfully vindicated and catered to. With T, nationalism is inflamed, the position of the military and the domestic repressive apparatus is strengthened and the regime narrative justifying its objectionable behavior appears amply vindicated. Under the circumstances, negative pressures may be completely counterproductive.

Even when a re-energized courting of traditional elites is the adversary’s choice, the strategy of external powers could, in principle, shift from threats and sanctions to positive inducements, yielding Outcome T. Inducements may include economic concessions (e.g. loosening sanctions), diplomatic gestures (e.g. support for membership in international institutions), or security assurances (e.g. promises of non-aggression). Such a reversal stands to be successful only if the interests of traditional elites have evolved in ways that make them welcome such inducements. Thus, for instance, it is apparent that China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has developed economic interests that have largely displaced its original, ideologically driven, agenda. Similarly, Cuba’s Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), once a spearhead of international revolutionary activism, has since acquired control over a significant segment of the economy, including the lucrative tourist sector, implying that its interests in Cuba’s integration into the global economy may far surpass its commitment to Marxist ideology. Opportunities to change the other side’s conduct thus arise when foreign inducements can further the developing interests of traditional...
elites. Success here assumes not only that the regime faces slipping domestic enthusiasm for its rule, but also that the concerns of traditional supporters have evolved in the desired direction. These are quite restrictive conditions. Moreover, if the regime’s failures are substantial and if values and interests within the body of society have become sharply incompatible with established government priorities, even reinvigorated endorsement by traditional elites may not suffice to secure the regime’s position. Under these circumstances, new sources of support must be found.

**Pursue new forms of support (Strategy A):** A regime seeking new sources of support is a promising object for positive engagement (Outcome A₁), since, unlike traditional supporters, those now courted may have interests largely compatible with accepted international norms. These generally are groups that were never part of the ruling coalition, and whose interests and preferences incline them to desire socioeconomic reform and policy moderation. This could include members of a burgeoning middle class, whose economic interests require not rent-seeking activities in a context of international isolation, but commercial and entrepreneurial activities in a liberalized economic setting, and who desire access to international markets and sources of investment. This could encompass cultural and intellectual elites demanding greater freedom of expression and may include portions of the country’s youth wishing to participate in an international, youth-oriented, culture. However, it is necessary that these groups be considered potentially meaningful sources of support for the beleaguered regime, whereas, if they are to become significant political players, some degree of prior liberalization seems necessary, and this is unlikely to occur when the external environment seems too threatening. Consequently, an easing of international pressures may be needed if the regime is to base its survival on new sources of domestic support. When the regime shifts its focus to new types of backers, it is important that the foreign power provides them with sufficient reason to press for altered regime policies. The surest way of undermining the process is to demonstrate, via continued punishment (Outcome A₂), that foreign powers have nothing to offer emerging elites. It is also necessary that the concessions desired by new elites be sufficient to meaningfully engage their interest—token gestures are neither here nor there.

The best outcome, from the US perspective, is A₂, the next best is T₁, which is less attractive because the regime’s supporters may be less fully committed to reform. More undesirable than either are A₁ and T₂, both of which are associated with punitive US pressures.

**THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN**

I have focused almost exclusively on circumstances that encourage engagement on the part of the adversary, while saying little about the fact that a decision to engage is politically difficult for US leaders. Both the culturally embedded conviction that bad parties should be treated harshly and fears of being charged with appeasement militate against otherwise desirable strategies (thus suboptimal outcomes A₁ and T₁).

Fuller consideration of how the domestic political calculus on the US side could be altered must be left for a later date, but three observations can be made here. The first is that a unified government makes engagement decisions less difficult for those at the pinnacle of US political authority: a president whose political party also controls Congress is less likely to fear political attacks from within the halls of power. Similarly, a president enjoying high levels of public support can absorb criticism more easily than one sagging badly in the polls. Finally, a second-term president is less politically vulnerable, and thus better positioned to take political risks than one facing a future re-election struggle.

Ultimately, it is important to keep squarely in mind the central influence of the domestic political context when the choice or effectiveness of carrots and sticks is at issue.

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**REFERENCES**


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