



## All Talk and No Strategy: The limits of diplomacy

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As Israeli warplanes pounded Lebanon last week, European leaders called for diplomacy. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan dispatched a three-member team to the region to urge all parties to exercise restraint. Even President George W. Bush said, "To help calm the situation, we've got diplomats in the region." Officials ritually promote diplomacy and dialogue, but absent an overarching strategy, these are no panacea. Indeed, diplomacy for diplomacy's sake can sometimes make matters worse.

On April 9, 2000, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared that Israel was a "cancerous body in the region . . . [which] must be uprooted." Like Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Nasrallah added, for good measure: "Jews invented the legend of the Nazi atrocities." But rather than ostracize him, Kofi Annan became the first

senior international leader to shake hands with the terror chief. His outreach did not moderate Hezbollah, but rather emboldened the group and endowed it with newfound prestige.

Within the United States, the efficacy of dialogue is a mantra among the foreign policy elite. "Diplomacy is much more than just talking to your friends. You've got to talk to people who aren't our friends, and even people you dislike," former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told the *New York Times* on May 26, shortly before the Bush administration announced its decision to engage the Islamic Republic of Iran. But just as Annan's intercession with Hezbollah made matters worse, Washington's perpetual willingness to give diplomacy a chance can backfire.

Many adversaries factor the West's preference for engagement into their strategies. In 1990, Saddam Hussein offered to negotiate a withdrawal from Kuwait, all the while consolidating his occupation. Had President George H.W. Bush heeded the advice of Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to accept Saddam's offer, Kuwait might still be Iraq's 19th province. As secretary of state, Powell was willing to entertain a second U.N. resolution on Iraq, which gave Baghdad, Damascus, and Tehran time to organize resistance.

Misplaced confidence in an adversary's sincerity can hamper rather than hasten solutions to international problems. Following the 1993 Oslo Accords, U.S. officials failed to calibrate their level of engagement with Palestinian chairman Yasser Arafat to his level of commitment to peace. President Bill Clinton in 1996 assigned the Central Intelligence Agency to train Palestinian security forces, but many graduates used their newfound skills to further terrorism, not to stymie it. After he graduated from a U.S.-led counterterrorism training course, Palestinian security officer Khaled Abu Nijmeh organized a series of suicide bombings and took part in the May 2002 siege of the Church of the Nativity.

More recently, Hamas responded to a State Department deal to funnel aid to Gaza with rocket barrages and the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Diplomats can say the money did not go to Hamas, but

money is fungible. The time was not right; nor was the strategy. Foggy Bottom may have thought the money was a show of compassion, but instead it gave a green light to terror. And even with the benefit of hindsight, Bill Clinton falls back on the same platitudes. On July 7, he suggested striking a deal with Hamas. "I'd still talk to them if they wanted to talk," he said. Such a move would, like Annan's with Nasrallah, legitimize terror.

Poorly timed dialogue is often worse than no talk at all. Lebanon once looked like a potential Bush administration success story. On April 18, Bush welcomed Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora to the White House. "We took great joy in seeing the Cedar Revolution. We understand that the hundreds of thousands of people who took to the street to express their desire to be free required courage, and we support the desire of the people to [be] . . . truly free," Bush said.

How unfortunate, then, that during her first trip to Lebanon as secretary of state three months later, Condoleezza Rice chose to meet the pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud, against whom the pro-democracy forces had rallied. Her aides may have counseled talk, but the timing and symbolism deflated the Cedar Revolution. Her meeting was out of place with the vision both she and the president had pledged to promote. Foggy Bottom's subsequent unwillingness to press demands that the Lebanese government disarm Hezbollah

demonstrates that the price of dialogue can be high indeed.

Rice's most recent outreach to Iran was hardly timed to succeed. The Iranian leadership had heard Rep. John Murtha and Sen. John Kerry's declarations of defeat in Iraq. It felt emboldened. And it understood Rice's May 31 offer of negotiations as a sign of weakness. Less than a week later, on June 4, Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei declared, "In Iraq, you failed. . . . Why do you not admit that you are weak and your razor is blunt?" Engaging overconfident adversaries leads to entrenchment. That adversaries rebuff offers of concessions with more violence should not surprise.

Indeed, the Iranian leadership has a much better sense of timing than the State Department. President Ahmadinejad's statement that he would not respond until August signals that Tehran - not Washington - controls the process. The Iranian military can continue to enrich uranium while Iranian politicians talk about talk. That Ahmadinejad promised a response on August 22 - corresponding to the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's night journey from al-Aqsa to heaven - shows a sophisticated appreciation of symbolism, and will enable Ahmadinejad to channel religious passions and rally his constituents. Had Washington demanded a response on July 20 - the anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini's 1988 decision to negotiate an end to the Iran-Iraq

war - the advantage would be Washington's. Almost as an afterthought, Rice demanded the Islamic Republic respond by July 12. The deadline lapsed without consequence. Even as the U.N. Security Council promises to renew deliberation on punishment, Tehran knows it can count on weeks if not months of more deliberation and additional last chances.

It is not just in the Middle East that the failure to tie diplomacy to an overarching U.S. strategy backfires. As the North Korea crisis continues, the Bush administration appears ready to repeat Clinton's mistakes by rewarding Kim Jong Il's provocations with diplomatic legitimacy and material gain. Unsurprisingly, the Clintonites still urge this approach: Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told CNN on July 5 that the U.S. government should respond to North Korea's missile tests by resuming bilateral talks with Kim Jong Il. On *Meet the Press* four days later, former U.N. ambassador Bill Richardson explained the North Korean mindset: "They don't believe in compromise. They believe in their only way or the highway. Their view is that their cause is right, and they're going to wait you out." Pyongyang's desire to run down the clock demonstrates a strategic framework. Richardson's recommendation did not. "I believe the only way to deal with them - and we have shown that effectively in past dealings in the Clinton administration - is direct engagement."

Robert Gallucci, lead negotiator for the 1994 Agreed Framework, at the time billed as a major breakthrough for diplomacy, appeared on the same show and argued that striking a diplomatic deal with North Korea was more important than holding Pyongyang to it. "Nobody did that deal in '94 thinking we were trusting North Koreans. . . . We caught them cheating. You might make another deal." What you don't do, he argued, is let that sour you on more deal-making.

Bush appears to concur. In a July 6 press conference, he called four times for diplomacy to continue, even while acknowledging that "diplomacy takes a while, particularly when you're dealing with a variety of partners." But when winning Chinese and Russian acquiescence becomes more important than denying Kim Jong Il missiles, process has trumped outcome. That's a recipe for strategic failure.

Foggy Bottom's enthusiasm for dialogue absent strategic context has a corrosive effect on U.S. relations with its allies. Take Turkey: On June 6, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced his desire to visit the White House. On July 5, Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gül repeated the request in a meeting with Rice. The State Department endorsed the meeting, explaining that it's convention to grant the prime minister of any NATO ally - even one that hosts Hamas - a White House audience.

But Erdogan wants an Oval Office meeting less to engage in sincere dialogue and more to imply White House endorsement. His request came amid growing domestic difficulties. While Erdogan's Justice and Development party came to power in 2002 on an anti-corruption platform, his finance minister now faces a corruption probe, Erdogan's own assets are murky, and last month Turkish officials announced a probe into money transfers from top adviser Cuneyd Zapsu to an al Qaeda financier. Turkey's currency has lost 20 percent of its value in recent weeks. Turkish talk shows speculate daily about early elections.

Two recent Turkish polls place support for the Justice and Development party at just under 30 percent. Any visit by Erdogan during an election campaign will only antagonize the remaining 70 percent of Turks who will complain of interference. Talk is fine. But only when guided by strategy.

Diplomacy is the bread-and-butter of statecraft. Richard Armitage is correct that engagement with adversaries is important. But results matter most. As the Middle East does battle, Iran pursues nuclear weapons, North Korea goes ballistic, and Arab liberalism collapses for lack of support, surely the Bush administration should come to grips with reality, rather than engage in a diplomatic fantasy in which all adversaries are flexible, and all dialogue partners sincere.

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