Domestic Sources of Influence on Foreign Policy

Foreign policy does not exist in a vacuum. Throughout American history, foreign policy has reflected conflicting domestic agendas. In particular, when developing policy with respect to Iran, the Obama Administration needs to consider multiple domestic sources of influence. Lobby interests, public opinion, values and ideologies, and the executive bureaucracy present distinct challenges in formulating responsible foreign policy.

Lobby Interests

A variety of business, ethnic, and issue-oriented lobbies can impact US policy. They can leverage policymakers through financial support for those in favor of their agenda, mobilizing and organizing against those who do not, and by encouraging their members to actively participate in the political process.

Business interests play a particularly essential role in the crafting of US foreign policy. The relationship that exists between contractors and the Congressional leaders can be characterized as the Military-Industrial or Congressional-Industrial-Complex, within which policy, business, and constituent interests intertwine. Defense contractors benefit financially from a hawkish position toward Iran. By characterizing Iran as a threat that America must militarily address, they provide a justification for government subsidies and the production of more weapon technologies.

The Israel lobby views Iran as a national security threat to Israel's existence. Groups consisting of the Anti-Defamation League, CAMERA, and American-Israel Public Affairs Committee tend to lobby for a hard-line approach to dealing with the regime, including tougher sanctions.

Finally, human rights groups like those advocating for women's and homosexuals' rights work to bring their respective issues to the forefront of the policy debate.

The Obama administration should push for increased transparency in the relationships between government and lobbies through support of ethical reform. Policy should be created in the best interest of America as opposed to the favors that government officials and businessmen may receive as a result.

Public Opinion

Another source of influence on foreign policy comes from the American people. The President must balance what he believes to be in the best interest of the state while being held accountable to those who elected him. Public opinion, the media, grassroots movements, and election results are all interrelated in their effects on foreign policymakers. The potential effect of public opinion is complicated by the fact that it is difficult to measure, fluctuates rapidly, and the majority opinion may not be representative of the entire population. Foreign policy is communicated largely through the filter of the media, which often emphasizes various viewpoints of stories that fit its own agenda or needs.

For the Obama Administration, balancing these variables will be essential to developing a comprehensive foreign policy towards Iran. Gallup polling numbers from December 2007 show that thirty-one percent of Americans see Iran as the greatest threat to the world, a far larger threat than any other state. As of November 2007, Seventy-three percent of Americans believe that diplomacy and economic means should be the primary approach to addressing the Iranian threat. However, Rasmussen reports that fifty-seven percent feel that war with Iran is likely.

These are views that should inform, but not define Obama's foreign policy. Certainly, President-Elect Obama is accountable to the electorate, but his role as Commander-In-Chief endows him with a higher responsibility to protect American interests, security, and welfare. If it comes to acting against the will of the majority, President-Elect Obama should make an open and honest case to the public explaining his actions and positions. He should look to the media as an independent information source

for assessing the Iranian situation as well as domestic opinion, with full awareness of media biases and agendas.

Values and Ideology

The Constitution serves as the backbone of American belief in equality of opportunity, justice, and freedom and ultimately colors our assessment of situations abroad. Ideological disagreements over these beliefs can cause strain on diplomacy. However, future diplomatic negotiations can be attained through the mutual understanding of the need to sustain not over our own sovereignty and power, but the safety and power of regional areas as well. Recognizing the challenges of Middle-Eastern stability can ensure the stability of our regions. In order to achieve any progress towards peace in the Middle-Eastern region, it is imperative to work toward improving relations and ensuring peaceful resolutions to conflicts.

This is a daunting task considering Iran's explicit funding of Shiite militias within Iraq, their unwillingness to sign and ratify the NPT, and their refusal to respect the sovereignty of our ally Israel. These factors have motivated our principled isolation of Iran. Therefore, we strongly recommend renewing rounds of diplomatic negotiation, increasing support of the U.S. State Department's diplomatic operations throughout the Middle-East, and multi-lateral support to mitigate conflicting ideological applications of values-based diplomacy. Our negotiations should be based on our mutually understood conceptions of justice, sovereignty, and the inalienable rights of man.

We can apply this understanding with respect to the value of peaceful resolutions to conflicts through discourse to encourage future relations and stability throughout the Middle-East. The proposal to open lines of communication is not an abandonment of our current or previous conflict-resolution principles, but rather a shift in emphasis of diplomatic relations through discourse as a primary means to achieve progress.

The Executive Bureaucracy

Throughout the 20th century, the Executive Branch significantly extended its power to act unilaterally. Specifically, in the past eight years, the Bush Administration exercised unprecedented latitude to act in foreign policy affairs. The Congressional Resolution that supported President Bush's directive to invade Iraq ceded proper oversight to the Executive Branch. Institutional sources of influence toward Iran must include a changing relationship between the Bureaucracy, the Executive, the Judicial, and the Legislative branches. Through congressional oversight, the power of the Executive Branch ought to be contained.

To rectify these concerns, a number of adjustments must be made to our domestic institutions. First, in order to moderate the government's response, the balance of power must be ensured. Congress must clearly define and enforce action with respect to Iranian policy; the Executive Branch should keep the Legislature abreast to its foreign policy agenda. The Judicial Branch must be prepared to regulate policy created by the Legislature and the Executive Branches in accordance with the Constitution. And finally, the President must nominate, with consent from the Senate, advisors with the courage to oppose dangerous and irrational foreign policy agendas. Our elected officials' policy toward Iran will only succeed with a proper working structure of domestic institutions.

In order to ensure stability, security, and peace in the Middle East region, the Obama Administration must craft a policy towards Iran that judiciously incorporates the interests advanced by the aforementioned domestic sources of influence. A carefully structured foreign policy seeking to stabilize the Middle East is critical for the future success of United States foreign policy as we adapt to future international challenges.