

GREAT DECISIONS

GDTV 2010 Transcript

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Fall 2009

I thought we would start off with sort of a broad question and address some of the larger changes in US foreign policy towards the Persian Gulf as a whole. President Obama made an historic speech from Cairo to the Muslim world we have appointed a Special Envoy to negotiate Middle East Peace Process. President Obama has offered direct negotiation with Iran. The Iranian elections are obviously a big issue so a lot of things are changing in the region. What's your assessment of US foreign policy towards the Persian Gulf as some of these developments occur?

We're still into opening stage so of that but I think that what the administration needs to do in an opening stage is to change the atmosphere. If you want to be able to negotiate, if you want to be able to step in and say looks, this is anew policy. We recognize that some mistakes have been done by the US in the past and now we have to rebuild our credibility than you need to address the atmosphere. You need to address the people. The President I think has done that in a massive way. Going to the Muslim world and talking about a lot of American values and talking about also, mutual respect which is critical. This is not a region that believes that whatever problems they have they will benefit by being dictated to what they need to do. They are often times ancient cultures, some of the first cultures of human civilization. They crave respect before they can do anything else. Particularity in the Iranian case that is certainly true.

They Iranians are extremely proud of the history they have. They have been a super power for most of that time. And they are seeking a somewhat of an equal footing with the United States in any negotiation. They are terrified of the idea of negotiating with the US as a weaker party. They want to be there as an equal partner.

Some would say that President Obama, more so than many of his predecessors, has tried to give that sort of status to Iran by speaking respectfully to the regime directly, which is something that his predecessor did not do. Extending an olive branch of sorts to the Iranian government. Has that resulted into anything concrete at this point?

It is rather soon to be able to say that as a result that are not because of the administration is still relatively new but I think again on that point it is the first steps that are necessary before we can actually have a negotiation, before we can change the atmospherics and what is in important here to note is that they administration has moved very quickly towards changing the atmospherics and they have succeeded to a large extent unilaterally, to change the atmospherics. It is not as if the Iranian government has been particularly helpful. And in fact much of the change that occurred in the atmospherics was unfortunately undone by the way radical elements in the Iranian government conducted the fraud in their Presidential elections and perhaps more importantly the vicious and widespread repression and human rights violations of the Iranian people by the government of Iran following the elections. That has certainly set back the ability to be able to move forward. It hasn't eliminated it. There is still that possibility but all that the President had done to change the atmospherics was given a heavy blow by the Iranians themselves.

Going back to that, I mean, President Obama was soft handed with Iranian regime in terms of his response to the post election violence and some of the issues we just referred to. Is that a sign that there is a lack of willingness to engage from the Iranian regime?

I'm not so sure I would characterize the way that the administration dealt with the election crisis as being soft handed. Certainly that is part of the criticism against the administration and certainly there have been a lot of voices saying that the administration should have done more and they should have sided with a particular faction in the elections. I think that President Obama realized early on that the crisis that was unfolding in Iran was one that could probably not have unfolded had the US taken a much stronger position. Had the United States adopted a position during the Bush era in which there was a lot of emphasis of threats and all options being on the table. Under dual circumstances we have seen quite clearly the Iranian government and all of its factions tend to rally round the flag and close ranks. But once that threat or the perception of threats was reduced the existing differences and disputes within the Iranian government came up to the surface. If the Administration in the middle of that taken a harsher position it would most likely have benefited the very same elements that were beating up the people on the streets of Iran and I think the President wisely decided not to pursue that path, however difficult that decision may have been internally here in the US. In which at times we want to see action and we may not be as concerned about the immediate implications and consequences of those actions.

For the United States as a super power not to act is a difficult thing for us to handle even if that may be the best course for us to pursue.

So would you say that that is the proper course to pursue in terms of Iran's nuclear program?

Not necessarily because that is a rather different situation. That is being dealt with by the Security Council. It is deemed by the Security Council to be an issue of international concern. And here the US needs to negotiate together with the (P five plus one) but that's different with siding from any other faction in an internal battle. And again I think the administration has made it clear that they are interested in negotiations but mindful of the way how the Iranian elections have evolved it seems like its going to be a very tough path to pursue, even if negotiations can start it will be even more difficult now than it was before to be able to come to a mutually acceptable compromise solutions. Never the less it seems to be the best path to pursue however difficult it yet may be.

Are you confident that the US and its allies will be able to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons?

I think preventing Iran from obtaining and nuclear weapon is very much doable. That is unfortunately not where we have put the red line. Particularly the Bush administration put the red line at preventing Iran from having nuclear capability which is a dramatically different thing. In many ways Iran already has nuclear capability, perhaps not a weapons capability but it is very close, if not already managed to master the fuel cycle. So if it is about walking the Iranians back on the progress the have made in the nuclear program I see that as a very difficult. But if the objective is to make sure that we prevent Iran from having an actually nuclear bomb rather than preventing Iran from being able to build one than I think that is fully doable and there are plenty of instruments at our disposal that can be used including verification and inspection by the IAEA that have not been fully utilized that probably constitutes the most efficient tools that we have from being able to prevent weaponization.

And as far as sanctions and sort of the negative measures that might, in your opinion in back tracking and stalling negotiations.

It seems very difficult, I mean, we have had sanctions on Iran for quite sometime but none of those sanctions have achieved their objective. Back in 1995 major sanctions were imposed in Iran. All US-Iran trade was completely eliminated and the objective was to prevent the Iranian nuclear program as well as other things. None of that was achieved. In fact we are facing now, 15 years later, with a grimmer situation than we did back in 1995 and yet the same voices that called for sanctions back then are calling for sanctions again. But it's a tool that has managed to not have a good resume. Its achievements are rather poor. Diplomacy however is not something that has been fully exhausted. That does not mean that sanctions cannot play a role in any negotiations or in any broader policy.

The shift however that Obama is trying to make is to put diplomacy at the center and have sanctions being as one of many tools that you can use within that diplomacy. The policy as it was before was to put sanctions and threats at the center and diplomacy was something that was out there far in the periphery. That's the shift that the administration seems to be pursuing.

Do you think that US policy makers understand the tactics that Iran is deploying in its foreign policy terms of some of the statements that have been made by President Ahmajinedad regarding the holocaust and that nature, some of the inflammatory remarks that he makes. This sort of nuclear posturing. Are these not merely rhetorical defense mechanisms that are being used by Iran and are perhaps being given too much credibility to the Iranian regime when it comes to these things in drumming up in making Iran more of a threat than it might actually be?

I think in many ways Iran is not as big of a threat as we sometimes see it. It does not mean however that there isn't a significant potential for Iran to be disruptive and in fact there is probably a good number of occasions in which Iran has been that. But I think you're right in the sense that if we only look at the rhetoric of Iran, it come across as being far more powerful, far more threatening and capable than it actually is.

When you take a look at Iranian foreign policy actions and rhetoric, you actually end up seeing two rather different pictures. None of those pictures are pleasant to look at but there still quite different from each other and

if we focus too much on the rhetoric than we may risk falling into a trap that the Iranian government essentially has laid out because they use the rhetoric often times to deceive and confusion the outside world of what their actually interest and policies are and that's a problem I thin that in the past we often got ourselves stuck into.

If fact in previous administrations at times there seemed to almost have been a redlines of welcoming in engaging with Iran in a rhetorical battle. That is not the best of policies I think that letting Ahmajinedad and people that are using the most venomous rhetoric stand there alone in using that type of rhetoric will do the US much more good because it will show what elements are actually being disruptive and what elements that are trying to be constructive.

Just following up on that, so often Iran is perceived as being an irrational actor because some statements were, when you look at the actions that the country is taking, they are anything but irrational. Whether it be positioning itself in Iraq or Afghanistan, so I do think that there is a danger there like you said at taking the rhetoric at face value. I'd like to move on to Israel because I think that's the situations that overlapped a bit. They obviously see Iran as a very real threat to their existence and they have made numerous statements that there has been perhaps a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. What's your take having written about Iran and Israeli relations. Is that a real possibility and if that did happen what would be the repercussions?

Well Israeli and Iranian relations are far more complicated than meets the eye. There is a long history of collaboration behind the scenes between Iran and Israel back in the 1980's. It was the Israelis that were lobbying Washington to talk to Iran, to even sell arms to Iran and not pay

attention to Iranian rhetoric unless it was against Israel because rhetoric was not reflective of actual policies. Now of course a lot of things have changed. Now you have a much more intense rather than symbolic battle between the Israelis and the Iranians that would call it a strategic rivalry for dominance in the Middle East. It does not mean however that either side's characterization of the other is fully accurate. There maybe some truth in it but its not fully accurate.

I would say that the likelihood of an Israeli strike on Iran is not as high as perhaps the Israelis want US to think. It is a tool that is often times used to put pressure on the United States out of an Israeli fear that unless the Israelis are pressuring the US to be tough on Iran, the US would start focusing on other issues.

It would strike a compromise with Iran and that may be useful to the US but not so useful for Israel. And as a result, one of the few instruments that the Israelis believe that they have at their disposal is to make the threat that if the US doesn't take very hawkish action against Iran than the Israelis will. Even if the Israelis were to act on this rather unlikely threat that they are making, the consequences are going to be tremendously dire for everyone in the region, including for Israel. First of all, if the argument is as the Israelis have made it, that Iran may have secret program, well if it's a secret program, how do you destroy it because you don't know where it is because it's a secret. So the Israelis under the best of circumstances which is still an unlikely scenario manages to destroy Iran's known facilities they will still not have destroyed Iran's capabilities to rebuild it or to pursue and unknown program that they may be having. So even in that scenario the Israelis admit that there actions could at best set back the Iranian program 3 to 5 years. And after which the Iranian would bounce back and probably pursue not just a weapons capability or the technology that would enable them to have the capability but actually _____ within itself. You would actually have a very angry, vengeful, nuclear Iran five years down the road. The Israeli hope is that within those five years there will be some sort of regime change in Iran in which a new government would come into place and not pursue a nuclear program. That is according to most analysts a highly unlikely scenario.

The first victim of any military strike or conflict with Iran is likely going to be Iran's all very embattled pro democracy movement; They will be the first ones in the internal opposition in Iran that the government would find an opportunity to get rid of in the case of a military confrontation with the outside world.

Beyond that, even if a regime change were to occur, there is nothing to suggest that the next government would not pursue a nuclear program with the same dedication as the current government, Remember, this program that the Iranians are currently pursuing and that they froze for almost a decade is a program that the Shah of Iran with the encouragement of the United States started back in the 1970's. This is not a regime specific program.

You mentioned the battle between Israel and Iran for dominance in the region, obviously the US is a key player in that whole scenario as well...what about the Arab regimes? Egypt, Saudi Arabia...are they feeling marginalized by Iran these days?

To a very large extent they have been marginalized by Iran. The power if these states have weighed quite significantly over the last two decades. Remember a couple of decades ago Israel was considered to be a military threat to (Israel?) or at least have the capability. Today because of a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, Egypt is not a threat to Israel but even if it wanted to be it would not be capable of being so because its military is based on American weaponry.

Without American support, Egypt has not capability to be such a foe. Now, I'm not saying this as that's a negative thing but it does show that much of the Arab regimes that are pro American have become quite dependent in the US which makes it less possible for them to act independently of the US. This means that the US has a lot of leverage over them. Iran is not one of these countries. The US has very little leverage over Iran and as a result it is in the position because of that and other factors as well to pose a challenge to the current order. That is something that the Iranians have been doing for more than thirty years. The Iranians are seeking a far greater role in region.

They want to be recognized as such and that is seen as a major problem by some Arab states, particularly the Arab states that they themselves are having rather unpopular dictatorships governing them because the greatest threat that they see is a populist Islamic, political Islamic movement reaching their shores because that would be an existential threat to their regimes and that is certainly the case in Mubarak's Egypt and in Jordan as well as in Saudi Arabia.

If, for example, the US, Israel started turning the knobs with the only tools that they do have, the only tools of leverage that they do have are say sanctions of military action. What would the reaction be from Iran? How could they destabilize the region?

The Iranians have shown a certain capability to create problems throughout the region and in fact it seems to have been one of their policies that whenever the US is unwilling to deal with Iran, recognize Iran's role, negotiate with Iran, their response is to make it as costly as possible for the US to pursue that policy of non recognition. That means, playing its cards against US interest in Lebanon, in Israel-Palestine in Iraq in Afghanistan in the Persian Gulf. Areas that are a vital security interest for the US in which also the US is quite involved in. Particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are areas that the US has made it very clear that it needs to stabilize and is seeking a way to be able to exit those arenas. Without some level of collaboration with Iran that's going to be a much more difficult task than it already is and those are some of the threats. That's the leverage that the Iranians are using against the US in case of an escalation of sanctions or even military threats.

What would that look like more concretely?

We don't know yet. The Iranians seem to be cleverly, ah, keeping some of their capabilities unknown, leaving the rest of the world to guess about it but judging from the past capabilities and patterns that we've seen is that the Iranians seem to have enough of an intelligence apparatus in these arenas in which they can use a symmetric warfare against the United States. Certainly when we talk to people in the US military they believe that Iran already has used that to a significant extent against the US at various points in the last eight years. But I think that a consensus would be that whatever the capabilities that the Iranians have, they have utilized only a fraction of them compared to that they can if there is a real confrontation between the US and Iraq.

Iran has positioned itself very well following the US invasion on Iraq, which we can talk about the merits of on its own, but where does Iran stand today and what is its long term strategy in your opinion?

Iraq of course is Iran's largest neighbor in the Arab world. It is a country that Iran whether it was called Iran or whether it was called Persia and whether Iraq was called Syria or Babylon has been a strategic rival of Iran for 3000 years. Most of the big battles have been on that front between Iraq and Iran so there is an historical legacy of these two countries having found themselves to be at odds with each other and having paid a very heavy price for the inability to find common cause and agreement. The latest example of course was the Iraq-Iran war which saw a million people as casualties on both sides. This is a war that was the bloodiest after second world war and in the history of the twentieth century and it is a war of which the legacy of it is visible both in Iraq and in Iran for anyone who goes there and visits particularly in Iran you will see a lot of people who are bearing the scar of having had chemical weapons used against them by Saddam Hussein's forces, incidentally chemical weapons that often times were provided to Saddam Hussein by western countries.

From the Iranian perspective, finding an alliance or some sort of partnership with Iraq, the only Arab country in the area that has a significant majority shared population in which Iraq can use some of these ideological variables to find some common ground is of utmost national security interest in order to avoid ever finding itself at war with that country because of the tremendous cost that that would inflict on Iran. Some would argue that Iran has lost the opportunity to find a true friendship with Iraq. It has meddled too much, it has got itself too involved in factional Iraqi politics to be able to be seen as a benign neighbor whose only interest is looking for Iraq's integrity and well being. Others would argue that Iran had no other choice but to do so. But what seems to be guiding the Iranians is to avoid the situation in which Iraq would have a pro American government that has very few connections to Iran in which Iran would have very few leverages over because of the risk of such a neighbor once again being able to be used or itself agreeing to be a tool against Iran's position in the region.

That seems to be a nightmare scenario for Iranians and they're essentially betting on every possible faction inside of Iraq to be able to have decent relations and leverage over them to ensure that if they come out victorious in the internal Iraqi end fighting or internal Iraqi political process, whatever factions comes out on top should have good relations with Tehran.

Just going back to the election in Iran and post election atmosphere I think there's been a lot of feelings here in the US about what happened there and what it means for US foreign policy. What, in your opinion, is the biggest misconception of what has come out of that in terms of the way Americans are viewing it?

The June elections in Iran and the media coverage of that and the ability for ordinary Iranians to use their cell phone cameras and rush home and upload it onto facebook, twitter about it, put it on youtube and make sure that the outside world would see what has reduced the common misconceptions that exist in the west about what's going on in Iran. For one of the first times we had a lot of eye witness accounts with imagery to be able to put together the pieces of this big puzzle. What we're seeing in my view is a very popular, spontaneous, uprising or protest against widespread obvious fraud by the government to insure Ahmajinedad would win reelection in spite of overwhelming evidence that his popularity had decreased and there was significant support for the reformist candidate Mousavi. What happened afterward is also something that we should not forget. It is not just the voter fraud.

There can be differences of views on that and there are some that are arguing that perhaps it wasn't full fraud but what there can't be any doubt about was the Iranian government's brutal crack down against peaceful protesters who were there, out there asking for their rights to be respected. These were clear violations of human rights in Iran and it showed the brutality which the Iranian government is capable of using against its own people and in fact against the very same people who started this revolution in Iran thirty years ago because this was not necessarily during the time of the Shah and unpopular government battling the entire population. This was one faction of the government fighting another faction of the government and that second faction seemed to have the majority of people on its side. This was an internal fight within the government that went beyond any boundaries that we have seen in the past and truly showed the Machiavellian and brutal inclination of some of the hard line elements in the Iranian government.

And reading the tea leaves, what may come of this all in your opinion?

One of the things that will most likely not come about is a return to the status quo. You have seen the Iranian government particularly some of the elements that are not elected truly delegitimize themselves in the eyes of their own supporters, this is not delegitimization that took place against people in the Diaspora who didn't view the government as legitimate in the first place but people inside who even religious people found what the actions of the government were to be fully delegitimized and have now as a result been put into question in their own minds the legitimacy of not only certain institutions of the government but the government as a whole. It's going to be very difficult for the government to be able to rebuild that. Particularly mindful of that fact that it has so far shown very little willingness to admit guilt, to apologize for errors and to actually seek justice for those who have been victimized on the contrary the violations against the rights of the people of Iran are continuing and intensifying as we speak...mindful of the fact that we're talking about diplomacy with Iran, I think that the

election crisis in Iran shows that its important that for the united states at some point as it begins negotiation with Iran...I'll rephrase that...

The election crisis and the violence that pursued in Iran shows that its important that in any diplomacy with Iran, the United States needs to think of short term security interest which ranges from Iraq and Afghanistan and the nuclear issue and the stability of the Middle East as a whole but also some of its more long term interests which is to make sure that it has proper relations with Iran that it respects the human rights of its own population. If we don't include human rights on the agenda in a negotiations than we may run the risk of repeating the mistakes that we've done in the Middle East in the past which is that we have working relations with dictators who violate the human rights of their populations and those populations blame the US for giving the external security for those governments to continue to do so, to violate their rights.

That's the situation we have today in Egypt. There is a large part of the population that tends to be very anti American same thing is true for Saudi Arabia and same is true for Iran under the Shah. Now for thirty years we have not had a relationship with Iran, we may be going in a direction where we can have that but its important to learn that lesson that you never really secure your long term security interest if you don't include human rights on the negotiation agenda.

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