

James Traub, publicat al New York Times el 19 de desembre de 2009.

If there is a one-word handle that fits the conduct of foreign relations in Barack Obama's first year as president, it is "engagement." The Obama administration has engaged with Iran, Russia, Burma, Sudan, North Korea.

"Engagement" sounds harmless — something any sensible administration would do (though the Bush administration apparently did far less of it).

But what, in fact, does President Obama have to show for "engagement" itself? And how do you keep score? He has just emerged from Copenhagen having brokered an agreement, however modest, on climate change. Does that count?

Engagement is shorthand for "talking to your enemies," or at least to countries with which you have profound differences. The Bush administration did not literally ignore countries like Iran, but when you describe a country as evil while obliquely threatening regime change, most diplomats would say you are talking in name only.

That was why, in the CNN/YouTube debate of July 2007, the Democratic candidates were asked if they would, "without preconditions," talk to leaders of states with which America has hostile relations. Mr. Obama said, "I would," adding that it was a "disgrace" that President Bush hadn't done so. Hillary Rodham Clinton called that answer "irresponsible and frankly naïve." That remains the view of many conservatives as the policy unfolds, but centrist and liberal foreign policy experts have widely applauded the engagement policy. In the current issue of *The American Interest*, for example, Jessica T. Mathews, head of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, gives the president "an unequivocal 'A' on this score.

But the math required to hand out such grades is complicated. Engagement can fail with its immediate object, but still reshape the climate of opinion; it can succeed in warming deep-frozen relations, but at a cost not worth paying.

If, in fact, President Obama has dispatched senior officials to talk to their counterparts in the most authoritarian states in the hope that treating them with respect will change their behavior, then events have so far proven him naïve. Persistent attempts to draw the poison from our relations with Iran have had absolutely no effect on Iran's nuclear program, or its sponsorship of terrorism. The North Koreans remain similarly intransigent. Ditto Myanmar and Sudan.

To some conservatives, engagement thus sounds like a euphemism for "appeasement." Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues, "There is a perception around the world that Obama is proceeding on bended knee to our enemies, and they're rebuffing us contemptuously."

Where, then, over the last year, has engagement actually advanced America's national interest?

Iran is both the most important, and the most passionately disputed, case.

Engagement here would seem to have been a failure — but only if you take the policy wholly at face value. One senior administration official who was not authorized to speak on the record says that while the offer of engagement was "never just an instrument or a ploy," and remains on the table, the very public effort to exhaust all available means of persuasion has helped move Europe, Russia and China toward a tougher stance.

"Iran had an alliance with Russia and China," he said, "and they were in a confrontation with the West. That's not the dynamic anymore." Should Iran remain recalcitrant, he said, "I remain convinced that we will get a resolution that Russia supports."

Indeed, the Russians do not talk about Iran today the way they did a year ago.

But is the change great enough to overcome Russia's historic resistance to sanctions, and to jeopardize its commercial relations with Iran? "Put me down as skeptical," says the neoconservative writer Robert Kagan. He agrees that Mr. Obama's persistent diplomacy has increased the likelihood of tough action but observes that engagement itself cannot change

basic calculations of national interest. "The Russians know the Iranians are trying to build a nuclear weapon, and they don't care," Mr. Kagan says.

The question of sanctions figures in two distinct campaigns of engagement — toward Iran, and toward Russia. The first has arguably succeeded by failing; the second appears to have actually succeeded. Russia, it's true, is scarcely an adversary like Iran or North Korea, and it's not fair to say that President Bush refused to engage with it. Nevertheless, the change in tone of Russian-American relations has made possible achievements like the relatively noncontentious talks over nuclear arms reduction that now seem close to conclusion.

Russia/Iran belongs at the top of the engagement scorecard. So, too, do American relations with the United Nations Security Council. Susan E.

Rice, the ambassador to the United Nations, says the engagement policy "has created a complete sea change in terms of countries' willingness and openness to cooperate with us." She cites tough sanctions imposed on North Korea, the nonproliferation resolution adopted at the Security Council session chaired by Mr. Obama in September, and a fine-tuning last week of measures against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Perhaps Sudan belongs near the bottom. Patient diplomacy rarely works with states that ignore international opinion, and virtually nothing has come of six months of conciliatory diplomacy toward the murderous regime of President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan. Human rights advocates say the administration has been too willing to make concessions and offer dialogue, with little in return.

Still, even staunch advocates say outside actors have no choice but to seek a political solution that the regime can live with, rather than content themselves with what Mr. Obama dismissed in his Nobel Prize speech as "the satisfying purity of indignation."

Engagement, then, has two faces: It seeks to offer even the most ruthless regime "the choice of an open door," as the president put it in Oslo. It also furnishes a kind of diplomatic currency. At the time of the YouTube debate, one of Mr. Obama's chief foreign policy advisers told me that "the cost-benefit analysis" of engagement had as much to do with changing America's global image as with changing the behavior of the state in question. If the United States changes its

language and diplomacy, "then you're a different America" — one in a far better position to marshal world opinion in order to advance its goals.

Perhaps, then, the ultimate measure of the success of the engagement policy will be the extent to which the good will President Obama has generated will tip the balance in the hard bargaining before his administration — over assistance from allies in Afghanistan, over new approaches to the Middle East and the international economic structure, and, most immediately, in the struggle to reach a meaningful agreement on how to slow global warming — an issue where the global good collides with the most basic questions of national interest. The credit Mr. Obama has earned will have to stretch a very long way.