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Perspective: Iran's new leaders and the American response

**The U.S. seems to fail every time it seeks to speak to
the Iranians**

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The inauguration of new President Hasan Rouhani, right, represents a shift from the inflammatory tone of past Iranian hard-liners like the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, pictured top center, and outgoing President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, left. Whether this will lead to a thaw in U.S.-Iran relations, however, depends on what President Barack Obama and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, center bottom, make of the possible opportunity to dial down the volume. (Khomeini.ir photo)

Maybe it's because of U.S. domestic politics. Maybe it's because of the humiliation many Americans feel they suffered at the hands of the Iranians. Think of those hostages whose rescue mission disintegrated in the Iranian desert. Maybe it's because America's critics are right. America has become an arrogant superpower, they say.

But somehow, the U.S. seems to fail every time it seeks to speak to the Iranians — bullying probably captures what seems to be the American stance.

Take what happened this past weekend. Iran inaugurated a new president, Hasan Rouhani, an Iranian "moderate." (I used to argue during the Iraq-Iran war that an Iranian became a moderate only when he ran out of bullets.)

In his inaugural speech, Rouhani suggested: "The only way to interact with Iran is to have dialogue from an equal position, creating mutual trust and respect and reducing enmities. ... Let me state it clearly that if you want a positive response, talk to Iran not with a language of sanctions but a language of respect."

That seems a reasonable request from the leader of a country which itself feels humiliated at the hands of the U.S. Think of the U.S.-United Kingdom overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and the imposition of the shah. Think of the brutal sanctions.

So how did the U.S. respond?

White House press secretary Jay Carney congratulated Rouhani and said his inauguration "presents an opportunity for Iran to act quickly to resolve the international community's deep concerns over Iran's nuclear program. ... Should this new government choose to engage substantively and seriously to meet its international obligations and find a peaceful solution to this issue, it will find a willing partner in the United States."

Does the U.S. always have to talk to Iran from a position of superiority? Rouhani asks for equality and we give him lectures. Rouhani asks for respect and we give him implicit threats. If they don't do what we want, we will hold their feet to the fire of the sanctions — or worse.

Rouhani did more than make a plea for better relations with the United States. In fact, the appointments in his Cabinet speak to his intentions to reach out to the U.S. His pick for minister of foreign affairs is Mohammad Javad Zarif. The new foreign minister was Iran's ambassador to the United Nations from 2002 to 2007 and thus Iran's highest ranking diplomat in the U.S.

Zarif has a Ph.D. in law and international relations from the University of Denver and has a lengthy history of acting positively in terms of U.S. foreign policy, from helping liberate Western hostages in Lebanon to facilitating the establishment of the Karzai government in Afghanistan.

I met with Zarif in New York and was greatly impressed by his commitment to better Iranian-U.S. relations and his deep appreciation of the obstacles and yet his willingness to overcome them.

The U.S. can respond favorably to this opportunity. But to do so will require a bold stroke from President Barack Obama. In the White House, bold strokes have been missing in action.

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