



Iran, Like China, Isn't a Responsible Stakeholder

November 26, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman** *Newsweek*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations

In a much-publicized address in 2005, then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick laid out the prevailing wisdom in Washington regarding the proper way to approach the People's Republic of China (PRC). "Chinese leaders have decided that their success depends on being networked with the modern world," Zoellick argued before the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. As a result, he contended, the U.S. needed to make every effort to turn the PRC into a "responsible stakeholder" on the world stage.

That belief helped inform U.S. policy toward China for more than a decade, with Washington trying repeatedly to coax Beijing into behaving better through expanded trade and closer integration in various multilateral institutions. Only in the past couple of years has China's behavior (from its predatory economic practices to its ongoing persecution of its Uyghur Muslim minority) sparked a serious rethinking of the American approach toward China—and prompted a tilt toward strategic competition with it.

But in Washington, bad ideas never really go away. That's why, even though the "responsible stakeholder" idea is no longer being applied to the PRC, it's now being recycled by the Biden White House in its dealings with another hostile nation: Iran.

At the prestigious Manama Dialogue conference held in Bahrain last week, the administration's special envoy for Iran, Rob Malley, argued that "most of the region's dysfunctions have their root in Iran's exclusion," and that wreaking havoc in the Middle East is simply Iran's "answer" to being left out of regional affairs. Malley's solution? Rehabilitate the Islamic Republic through extensive diplomatic outreach and generous economic concessions that are geared toward nudging the Iranian regime back to the nuclear negotiating table.

This reading of Iran's regional behavior is profoundly wrong. It portrays Tehran as a geopolitical victim, and excuses its rogue behavior—such as its mass sponsorship of terrorism and support for its assorted regional proxies—as simply a reaction to unfair treatment at the hands of the international community. It feeds the grievance narrative of Iranian officials, and reinforces those officials' contention that the United States is responsible for political affronts against the Islamic Republic for which it must pay restitution. And it posits that America is unique in its ability to alter and reshape Iranian behavior in a more constructive direction.

Yet, as both Iran's regional neighbors and its captive population are quick to point out, none of those things are true. The Iranian regime's persistent support of regional radicalism is not rooted in any kind of desire to be noticed. It is, rather, a reflection of the enduring imperative of "exporting the revolution" that was enshrined by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the country's formative 1979 constitution.

Similarly, American policy isn't to blame for the current plight of the Iranian people. Instead, it is the regime's revolutionary ideology and foreign adventurism that have helped to gradually transform the country into an international pariah. Meanwhile, domestic issues like corruption, repression and environmental mismanagement—and the Iranian government's culpability in all of them—rank as much higher priorities for ordinary Iranians than does the regime's "nuclear file," which most preoccupies policymakers in Washington.

It took the United States more than a decade to figure out that, contrary to Zoellick's contention, Beijing didn't simply want a seat at the global table. Rather, as has now become painfully obvious, the PRC's goal was—and remains—to overturn the existing international order in favor of one more advantageous to its strategic interests. One can only hope it takes us less time to acknowledge that Tehran seeks the very same thing.