

Avoiding a Bad Nuclear Deal with Iran

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As the confrontation with Iran enters a new, more dangerous phase, Washington must avoid the temptation of redefining its red lines in a manner that endangers national security.

The P5+1 -- which includes the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, China, and Russia -- has just accepted an Iranian offer of further nuclear talks. These talks will come at a crucial time. The West has dramatically ratcheted up pressure on the Iranian regime through new sanctions targeting Iran's oil exports and its central bank, and President Obama in remarks on Sunday took a tougher line than he has in the past by ruling out the notion of "containing" a nuclear-armed Iran. The next round of negotiations will therefore be an important test of the notion that pressure can force Iran to reconsider its nuclear ambitions, as well as a test of U.S. resolve in the face of Iranian obstinacy.

Sanctions on Iran have undoubtedly had an impact, driving down the value of Iran's currency, driving up inflation, and making it difficult for Iranians to sell oil or even buy food. But making life difficult for Iranians is not the objective of U.S. policy; indeed, for many years it was American policy to avoid causing widespread hardship in Iran. The U.S. goal is to halt Iran's nuclear activities, and that has not yet been accomplished -- Iran is spinning more centrifuges, and manufacturing more and higher-grade uranium than ever before.

If the upcoming round of talks, like previous iterations, fails to yield progress, the U.S. will be left with little recourse other than additional pressure, while Israel will have additional incentive to carry out a strike. But another alternative exists, which President Obama has yet to rule out -- that the U.S. will draw back our own redlines and accept a nuclear weapons-capable, if not nuclear-armed, Iran. This would be a dangerous miscalculation.

While the official U.S. and U.N. Security Council stance has long been that Iran must halt uranium enrichment as part of any serious talks, Washington has demonstrated tactical flexibility in an effort to allow Iran to "save face" and get negotiations started. From 2006-2008, the U.S. and its allies offered Tehran the so-called "freeze for freeze" deal, whereby Iran would merely temporarily freeze new enrichment and the West new sanctions, as a brief prelude to the

full suspension of both uranium enrichment and sanctions implementation called for by the U.N. Security Council. Similarly, in October 2009, the U.S. and its partners offered to swap Iran's low-enriched uranium (LEU) for the fuel plates Iran required to power its Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), with which it manufactured medical isotopes. Washington asserted that the arrangement was intended as a confidence-building measure, but did not negate the U.N. demand that Iran suspend enrichment.

Recently, however, there have been signs of a U.S. shift. In his speech on Sunday, the President assiduously referred only to preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, not a nuclear weapons capability. Likewise, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has asserted that the U.S. redline is that Iran not develop a nuclear weapon. This leaves open the possibility of Washington acquiescing to a "latent" nuclear weapons capability, whereby Iran retains weapons-applicable components of its nuclear program, such as its enrichment work, as long as it refrains from actually building a bomb.

Many analysts have urged President Obama to consider one of the various proposals that would allow Iran to continue enriching uranium, though perhaps under somewhat stronger supervision. One of these is the so-called Russian proposal, under which Iran would address the IAEA's questions in phases and the West would reciprocally ease sanctions. Another was the vague offer by Iranian President Ahmadinejad during his September visit to New York to cease Iran's production of highly-enriched uranium.

The allure of such a deal from the U.S. perspective is clear. Washington would cite the deal as a diplomatic triumph that averted war and limited Iran's nuclear capacity. Likewise, the Iranian regime, having compelled the West to recognize its nuclear status and retained its enrichment program, would tout the pact as a victory.

In reality, allowing Iran to retain its uranium enrichment program would carry serious risks for the U.S. and our allies. The Institute for Science and International Security warns that "without [a halt to enrichment], Iran's enrichment program would continue to grow in capacity and increase Iran's ability to quickly, and perhaps secretly, make highly enriched uranium (HEU) for nuclear weapons in its centrifuge plants."

In other words, the Iranian regime would have its cake and eat it, too. The current sanctions drive would fizzle and existing sanctions would be eased or lifted. A military strike would effectively be taken off the table, including by Israel, which would likely feel constrained from attacking nuclear facilities blessed by the U.S. The Iranian regime, having succeeded in defying not only the U.S. but the entire Security Council, would be strengthened domestically. But the threat of Iranian nuclear weapons would not be removed; instead, Iran could perfect its nuclear expertise, stopping just one turn of the screw away from producing a nuclear weapon, or even building one clandestinely.

As our confrontation with Iran enters a new, more dangerous phase, the U.S. must avoid the temptation of redefining our redlines and objectives in a manner that fails to satisfy our national security requirements. To avert war and defuse tensions through clever tactics and smart policies is admirable; to do so by abdicating our vital interests is not.

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