

Sticks, Carrots, and Nukes

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Articles & Testimony

No sane person wants to see more nuclear weapons in the world. They cause horrible destruction. The world needs to find a way to reduce the reliance on these weapons by existing nuclear states, be it by Britain and the United States or by Israel and India. Recent columns in these pages by George Monbiot and John Pilger acknowledged this, but dangerously underplayed the gravest threat to the global effort to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons: Iran.

We equally need to press Tehran about its nuclear programme, and challenge its disdain for international inspections and for the United Nations. Pilger suggests that concerns about the programme are largely a matter of "disinformation. . . from a discredited CIA-sponsored Iranian opposition group." No government on the UN security council agrees with him; it adopted three resolutions ordering Iran to suspend its dangerous nuclear and missile programmes without a single dissenting vote.

Britain, France, and Germany stepped forward in 2003 to take charge of the Iranian nuclear file. In 2005 Europe, with Britain in the lead, persuaded the Bush administration to set aside its deep concerns and to let the Europeans lead. Between 2006 and 2008, Europe orchestrated a series of security council resolutions about Iran. Under Javier Solana's leadership, Europe has put together a consortium of six great powers -- Russia, China and the US, along with Britain, France and Germany -- to negotiate with Iran. What an opportunity for Europe to show that it can take on the global leadership role it so craves. Instead, European leaders have had to swallow the bitter pill of admitting that they are making little, if any, progress.

The obvious temptation is to look for a scapegoat. Now that the US has shown that it fully endorses the European-led effort, blaming the Bush administration is less plausible. In this context, periodic rumours fly that Israel may soon strike Iran's nuclear facilities. The likelihood of such a strike any time soon remains small for the simple reason that Israel has much to lose from acting, unless in desperate straits. An Israeli strike would convert a global issue about Iran's failure to comply with its obligations under international treaties into a bilateral Israeli-Iranian issue on which many around the world would side against Israel.

Pilger suggests we confront "the real threat [that] remains almost unmentionable in western establishment circles and therefore in the media": namely, Israel's nuclear weapons. Before asking why Israel insists on keeping its nuclear arms, he might ask exactly what threat causes Britain to keep such weapons. Israel has to worry about radicals, from Iran to Gaza, who reject its right to exist. Faced with a much less ominous Warsaw pact, Britain insisted on the right to keep many hundreds of nuclear weapons.

That said, it is not surprising that Israel is more favourably disposed toward preventive action than any other country is. After all, Israel is the country most at risk from a nuclear Iran. Israelis see a nuclear Iran as an existential threat, due to the possibility of nuclear terrorism, the potential for miscalculation in a crisis, or the prospect that an irresponsible or fanatical Iranian leader might be tempted to use Iran's nuclear arsenal to expunge Israel from the region.

The challenge facing the international community -- the challenge on which Europe has claimed the leadership -- is to persuade Iran to step back from the nuclear brink. Diplomacy is more likely to be effective if it is reinforced by sticks and carrots. Besides its key role in the European-led diplomacy, Britain could do much on its own to reinforce the actions of its European partners to press Iran until it agrees to compromise. The City of London's importance as a hub for international finance means that warnings from the British government regarding the risks of doing business with Iranian institutions could appreciably increase the pressure on Tehran.

If Iran were in effect locked out of the world's two largest financial centres, New York and London, even hardline Iranian leaders might reflect on the high cost of their refusal to compromise. British authorities need not take formal action; they have long been skilled in the art of passing quiet messages to business leaders.

Scapegoating Israel sidesteps the issue. Instead, those worried about what Israel might do should take steps to address the security concerns that led Israel to conduct its recent military exercises designed to show that it could strike Iran if need be. Not only Israel but Britain and the whole world will be safer if together we can reduce the threat of the proliferation of nuclear weapons by reinforcing respect for the UN and international inspections.

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