

A New Strategy on Iran

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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The United States and Iran are playing programmed roles in a minuet on nuclear weapons. The United States pushes the U.N. Security Council to warn Iran about the consequences of going nuclear. And Iran continues its march toward development of nuclear power, even as its president declares that "we don't give a damn" about U.N. resolutions calling on Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment.

With the Russians and Chinese seemingly determined to block sanctions, our efforts at the United Nations promise to evolve slowly while Iran presses ahead with its plans. If we stay on the same path, we will be left with two choices: accept the reality of Iran's nuclear weapons capability or take military action to set back its ambitions.

Either outcome could prove disastrous. If Iran succeeds, in all likelihood we will face a nuclear Middle East. The Saudis -- fearing an emboldened Iran determined to coerce others and to promote Shiite subversion in the Arabian Peninsula -- will seek their own nuclear capability, and probably already have a deal with Pakistan to provide it should Iran pose this kind of threat. And don't expect Egypt to be content with Saudi Arabia's being the only Arab country with a nuclear "deterrent."

As for those who think that the nuclear deterrent rules that governed relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War will also apply in a nuclear Middle East: Don't be so confident. For one thing, the possible number of nuclear countries will drive up the potential for miscalculation. For another, with an Iranian president who sees himself as an instrument for accelerating the coming of the 12th Imam -- which is preceded in the mythology by the equivalent of Armageddon -- one should not take comfort in thinking that Iran will act responsibly.

But the alternative of using force to prevent or forestall the Iranians' going nuclear does not look much better. To begin with, there are no simple or clean military options. Air operations alone might involve striking hundreds of targets, many in populated areas where there are significant air defense capabilities in the process of being upgraded by the Russians. The more casualties we inflict, the more we inflame the Islamic world.

Perhaps we could manage the response if the military campaign inflicted relatively few casualties and succeeded in setting back the Iranian nuclear program. But such a rosy scenario assumes that Iran's ability to retaliate is relatively limited. Even if we have the means to prevent the Iranian navy and air force from shutting down shipping

into and out of the Persian Gulf, Iran has other options for turning any effort to take out its nuclear capability into a wider war.

The Iranians can foment far greater numbers of insurgent attacks against our forces in Iraq -- literally trying to set the earth on fire under our feet. To cut off the support for such attacks we could be driven to act militarily across the border into Iran on the ground. Perhaps Iran would realize that an escalating conflict with the United States is too dangerous, but after underestimating the risks we encountered in Iraq, can we be so confident about what the Iranians might do?

If neither outcome that our current policy is likely to produce is acceptable, should we not look for another pathway? Of course, but the challenge remains one of changing the Iranian calculus. Iran must see that it either loses more than it gains by proceeding to move toward nuclear weapons or that it can gain more by giving up the effort. The problem with the current policy is that it threatens costs that either aren't believable or are likely to pale in comparison with what the Iranians see themselves gaining with nuclear power.

But what if we could threaten collective sanctions that the Iranians would see as biting? What if those were combined with possible gains in terms of a deal on nuclear energy, economic benefits and security understandings if the Iranians would give up the nuclear program?

While one can argue that the Europeans were trying to negotiate something like this with the Iranians, they were never able to put together a package of credible sanctions and inducements, because the United States was not really a part of the effort. True, this country has coordinated with the British, French and Germans in the Bush second term. But a serious effort at raising the costs to the Iranians and offering possible gains has never been put together.

Why not now? Why not have the president go to his British, French and German counterparts and say: We will join you at the table with the Iranians, but first let us agree on an extensive set of meaningful -- not marginal -- economic and political sanctions that we will impose if the negotiations fail. Any such agreement would also need to entail an understanding of what would constitute failure in the talks and the trigger for the sanctions.

The Europeans have always wanted the Americans at the table. Agreeing on the sanctions in advance would be the price for getting us there. To be sure, the United States would focus as well on what could be provided to the Iranians, but the benefits have always been easier to agree on, particularly since meaningful sanctions will also impose a price on us. Real economic sanctions would not just bite Iran and its ability to generate revenue but also would undoubtedly drive up the price of oil. Our readiness to accept that risk at a time when high gasoline prices are becoming a domestic political issue would convey a very different signal about our seriousness to the Iranians -- who presently don't fear sanctions because they think they have the world over a barrel.

There is no guarantee such an approach will work with Iran. This Iranian government may simply be determined to have nuclear weapons. If that is the case, and if President Bush is determined to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons -- as he has said -- we would still be better off having tried a direct negotiating option before resorting to what inevitably will be a difficult, messy use of force once again.

The writer was director for policy planning in the State Department under President George H.W. Bush and special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton. He is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ♦♦

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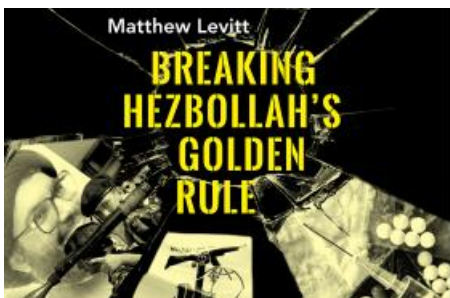
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