

Making Iran Play Ball

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The British, French, And German foreign ministers met last week with the Iranians and afterward declared that a crisis had been averted. Iran's threat to resume uranium enrichment activities has been put on hold for now. But are we out of the woods? Not likely. In the Paris talks, Hassan Rouhani, the Iranians' chief nuclear negotiator, reportedly was quite blunt, saying that incentives would not get Iran to accept a permanent halt to its enrichment activities. A temporary suspension remains acceptable to the Iranians, but they are clearly using it as leverage on the Europeans. In fact, at this point the dynamic of the negotiations seems more likely to change European, not Iranian, behavior. If anything, the Iranians seem to believe they can continue to move incrementally toward developing fissile material openly and clandestinely and without incurring any real costs -- and recent history would suggest they're right.

In October 2003, Iran reached an agreement to suspend its nuclear efforts with the Europeans; then in 2004 it reneged and paid no price for doing so. So the threat of referring the Iranian nuclear question to the United Nations Security Council is likely to ring hollow. Having engineered \$100 billion worth of deals with China, the Iranians probably believe they're protected by a Chinese veto of any U.N. sanctions by the Security Council. And regardless of the European admonition about consequences, the Iranians seem to read the British, French, and Germans well in believing that they are reluctant to contemplate sanctions of their own if it means pushing up the price of \$50-per-barrel oil.

The Iranians are manipulating the Europeans brilliantly, raising the pressure, then easing the pressure, counting on the British, French, and Germans to be grateful when they pull back from their threats. Ultimately, the basic Iranian strategy appears to be to tell the Europeans that Iran must have the capability to complete the nuclear fuel cycle on its own -- meaning that it can enrich uranium and reprocess plutonium on its own. In such circumstances, Iran will be able to produce nuclear fuel for electricity and fissile material for nuclear warheads. Of course, it will guarantee the Europeans that it won't create nuclear weapons -- only nuclear power.

But how good are such guarantees likely to be? For nearly 20 years, Iran hid significant parts of its enrichment activities, in violation of its obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty. Obviously, since Iranian guarantees cannot be accepted at face value, there will have to be intrusive verification and monitoring. But such a verification regime would be only as good as our collective intelligence and our access -- meaning that we would know in advance where all the Iranian nuclear activities are taking place and that there would be no limitations on surprise inspections. Don't bet on knowing the former or getting the latter.

Building Confidence

So what's to be done? Certainly, the best guarantee that the Iranians will forgo a nuclear-weapon capability is to see their behavior change in a way that provides far greater confidence about their intent. Accepting a go-anywhere-anytime inspection regime would be one good indicator of change. (Another would be to stop trying to subvert Israeli-Palestinian calm while, of course, denying that they are making any such effort.)

But the Bush administration can also change its approach so that the Iranians actually believe they will pay a price if they go nuclear. To do this, the administration must now be prepared to join the Europeans in the talks. This means crossing the threshold of dealing directly, if multilaterally, with the Iranians but only on the basis of an agreement with the Europeans. At present, the Europeans agree that sanctions would be adopted if the negotiations fail. But there is no understanding on what the sanctions would be or even how to decide if the negotiations have failed. In return for the administration's directly joining the talks, the Europeans must come to an agreement on the meaning of each of these points.

If the Iranians see that there is such an understanding, they would know that they would not escape a real cost, and they would no longer be able to play the Europeans off against us. Even that may not prove to be enough, but at least such an approach could change the current dynamics -- dynamics that have the Iranians inexorably moving toward having a nuclear capability while the world takes comfort in talks that cannot succeed.

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 and author of *The Missing Peace*.



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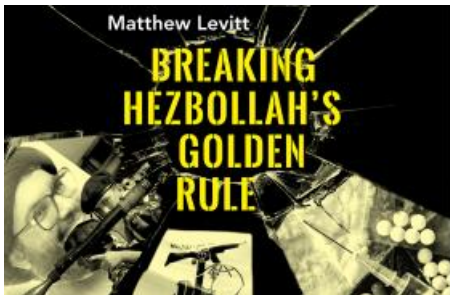
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