

Right Course on Iran

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Articles & Testimony

Susan E. Rice ["We Need a Real Iran Policy," op-ed, Dec. 30] derides as "bizarre" President Bush's statement that "we're relying upon others" to take the leadership role in stopping Iran's nuclear program. She dismisses out of hand the Bush administration's acceptance of European leadership on this issue, claiming that "obviously" the president has not had a "born-again conversion to multilateralism."

In fact, relying on European leadership is the smart course, and the unilateral U.S. initiative that Rice recommends would impede efforts to stop Iran's nuclear program.

Any U.S. offer to engage Iran would only sideline the negotiations between Iran and the European Union. And Europe is better placed to take the lead, given the history of distrust between the United States and Iran. Europe is trusted by both sides.

Rice dismisses Bush's statement that "we don't have much leverage with the Iranians right now," on the grounds that the United States could offer Iran significant incentives. But much of what she suggests the United States offer Iran consists of things that the hard-liners running Tehran do not want. Consider the normalization of relations, which Rice proposes as an incentive. The hard-liners have no desire for a U.S. embassy in Tehran; the onslaught of Iranians seeking visas would be an embarrassment to them. And normalization would provide Washington with a more high-profile platform for which to raise the full range of its concerns about human rights and democracy. Indeed, as Kenneth Pollack, the Clinton administration's National Security Council Iran officer, notes in his new book, "The Persian Puzzle," Iranian officials complain that "any criticism of Iran's internal affairs . . . is disrespectful," which "make[s] it clear that Iran is simply not ready for a meaningful relationship with the United States."

Rice calls for the United States to offer Iran incentives "in exchange for a full and verifiable halt to Iran's nuclear program as well as termination of its support for terrorism and anti-U.S. elements in Iraq and Afghanistan." But no Iranian political leader has expressed the slightest interest in following Libya's example by giving up terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. As the Iranian presidential campaign heats up before next May's elections, the candidates are competing as to who can go farthest in insisting that Iran will keep its current foreign policy stance, while denying that they will make concessions to the United States. The idea of a "grand bargain" with Iran, which Rice advocates, is rejected as "not a realistic or achievable goal" by the longtime advocates of a more active U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iran who signed a recent Council on Foreign Relations report on the subject.

Rice implies that the European Union is either unable or unwilling to promote the kinds of policies the United States wants regarding Iran. In fact, in the latest round of European-Iranian talks last month, the European side raised not only the issues of weapons of mass destruction but also of terrorism, Arab-Israeli peace and human rights. Europe has insisted that progress in dealing with Iran requires progress on all four fronts -- a more comprehensive stance than Rice proposes. Indeed, in June 2003, Europe suspended negotiations with Iran about a trade agreement when there was no progress on the full range of European concerns. And in August 2003 the leaders of Britain, France and Germany took the unprecedented step of bluntly telling Iran that it had to give up something to which Tehran had every right under international law -- its uranium enrichment program -- or it would be hauled in front of the U.N. Security Council, where it could face diplomatic or economic sanctions.

Given the lack of interest by Iranian hard-liners in what the United States has to offer and the strong stance Europe has taken in talks with Iran, the wisest policy is what the Bush administration is doing: supporting European leadership. The proper role for the United States now is to bolster the European initiative by encouraging others -- specifically, Russia and China -- to signal their support.

In the past, when Iran has been convinced that it faced a united insistence by the major powers on some course of action, it has made major concessions, as shown by its October 2003 suspension of uranium enrichment and the November 2004 Paris accords, which led to the current Iran-Europe negotiations. The Bush administration's focus on great-power consensus about Iran's nuclear program is the best way to make progress; the unilateral initiatives Rice proposes would be at best a diversion. Oddly enough, the sharpest critics of the Bush policy are those who complain about Bush administration unilateralism. The reality of multilateralism is that sometimes others take the lead and we follow.

The writer is deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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