Don't Make Hollow Threats

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Two things are very expensive in international politics, the game-theorist Thomas Schelling once observed: threats when they fail and promises when they succeed. President Bush appears to be headed on a path that could teach him this lesson. Last week he responded to Iran's decision to resume work on its nuclear program by asserting that "all options are on the table" to stop Iran's nuclear development. He also implied that were Israel to strike at Iran's nuclear facilities, the United States would support it. Unfortunately, these are hollow threats, unlikely to have much effect other than to cheapen America's credibility around the world. (Within hours of Bush's statement, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder made clear that he would not support any such action against Iran.)

Airstrikes against Iran would be extremely unwise. They would have minimal military effect: the facilities are scattered, are reasonably well hidden and could be repaired within months. With oil at $66 a barrel, the mullahs are swimming in money. (The high price of oil and Iran's boldness are directly related.) More important, a foreign military attack would strengthen local support for the nuclear program and bolster an unpopular regime. Iran is a country with a strong tradition of nationalism–it is one of the oldest nations in the world.

With 150,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, Tehran has many ways to retaliate against an American strike. Last week Donald Rumsfeld was listing conditions that would allow U.S. troops to begin leaving Iraq. High on his list was the question of whether Iranian officials would be more helpful in creating stability there. My guess is that dropping bombs on them is unlikely to produce a helpful attitude.

Economic sanctions are the other weapon of choice. The United States already has them in place against Tehran–with little effect–and the chances of widening them are low. To get comprehensive sanctions against Iran, Russia and China would have to agree. But Moscow is helping build one of Iran's reactors, and China is busy signing deals to buy oil and natural gas from it. Both countries will condemn Iran's actions, but they will not shut down their economic ties with it.

Many Iranians believe that they should and will be a nuclear power. I was speaking to an Iranian exile who lives in London who has spent time, money and effort plotting against the regime. For the first time ever, I found he was siding with the mullahs. "I would do exactly what they are doing," he said. "For strategic reasons, Iran needs a nuclear option. Look at where it lies, with neighbors like China, Russia, Israel and Pakistan, all powerful nuclear-weapons states." Last year, Iran's former foreign minister under the shah, Ardeshir Zahedi, argued that Iran should have nuclear weapons, and that under a different regime, Iranian nukes would be no more threatening than those of Britain. In fact, Iran's nuclear program was started by the shah in the early 1970s with American support.

But however it looks from Tehran's perspective, a nuclear Iran would radically change the security atmosphere of the Middle East. It would also make Saudi Arabia and Egypt rethink their own security needs, leading to a potential nuclear spiral. All

of which suggests that efforts to stop or at least delay the Iranian program are worth undertaking–intelligently.

But sticks are not going to work. In its second term, the Bush administration has softened its Iran policy and yet it remains unwilling to talk, let alone negotiate, on anything substantive. As with North Korea, the shift toward a less hostile policy is so slight that it can't possibly succeed. In fact, I sometimes wonder whether this new "soft" policy has been designed by Vice President Cheney's office, so that it fails, discredits any prospect of negotiating and thus returns us to the old policy, which is to do nothing and hope the regime falls (a prediction that has been made by neoconservatives for 15 years now).

The one man who has had extensive negotiations with the Iranians, Mohamed ElBaradei, director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said to me a few months ago that Tehran is seeking a grand bargain: a comprehensive normalization of relations with the West in exchange for concessions on nuclear issues. It will never give up its right to a nuclear program, he argues, but it would allow such a program to be monitored to ensure that it doesn't morph into a weapons project. But the prize they seek, above all, is better relations with the United States. "That is their ultimate goal," he said.

There are lots of reasons to be suspicious of Iran. But the real question is, Do we want to try to stop it from going nuclear? If so, why not explore this path? Washington could authorize the European negotiators to make certain conditional offers, and see how Tehran responds. What's the worst that can happen? It doesn't work, the deal doesn't happen and Tehran resumes its nuclear activities. That's where we are today.

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