

Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience

As the United States conducts bilateral and multiparty negotiations with Iran, it is worth recalling the last, and perhaps only, occasion when the U.S. and revolutionary Iranian governments cooperated closely and effectively. It was almost eight years ago, immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks. There is a popular perception that the United States spent that fall forming a broad international coalition and overthrowing the Taliban. It would be more accurate to state that, prompted by the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., the United States moved to join an *existing* coalition that had been trying to overthrow the Taliban since the mid-1990s. That coalition consisted of India, Iran, and Russia, and within Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance insurgency. By adding U.S. airpower and removing Pakistani support for the Taliban (also engineered by the United States), this unlikely coalition succeeded in quickly ousting that regime and replacing it with a broadly-based, moderate, and universally recognized successor. Iran's role in defeating the Taliban was largely indirect, and the result of its long-term material support for the Northern Alliance. Iran's role in the selection of a successor regime brought it into direct collaboration with the United States.

As the Bush administration's first envoy for Afghanistan, I represented the United States at the conference in Bonn, Germany in November 2001, where that new Afghani government was formed. In addition to delegations from each of the major elements of the Afghan opposition, we were joined by diplomats

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from all those countries that had long been playing the “great game” in Afghanistan, most notably India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia.

This meeting was hosted by the UN and chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi, a former foreign minister of Algeria and long-time senior UN troubleshooter. Brahimi and I had worked closely together previously on Haiti, in the mid-1990s, for which he had the lead for the UN, and I for the United States. As we first discussed plans for the upcoming Afghan conference, we differed on one point: Brahimi wanted to sequester the invited Afghan delegates from all outside influence, whereas I wanted to include representatives of all the states that had been fomenting civil war in Afghanistan over the past several decades. Brahimi felt it would be difficult to get agreement among the Afghans with all these external actors interfering. I felt it would be even more difficult to get such agreement without them.

My point of reference was the international processes that had ended the Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts. In both those cases, the major European powers, along with Russia and the United States, had gotten together to impose a peace

settlement upon the warring parties. At the Dayton peace conference in 1995, Richard Holbrooke had managed a particularly complex negotiation involving the Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox factions in Bosnia, their external sponsors in Croatia and Serbia, and the major powers of Western Europe and Russia. Four years later, the Kosovo air war had been brought to a close through two parallel negotiations, one involving the European Union, Russia, and Serbia, and the other

The experience over Afghanistan is a reminder of what was once possible and could be again

involving the eight major industrial powers (in other words, the G-8): Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The smaller group had negotiated Serbia’s withdrawal from Kosovo, while the larger had simultaneously designed the regime that would replace Serbian rule. Neither the Bosnian nor Kosovo conflicts could have been ended without the active collaboration of these external powers. Brahimi’s mental model for the upcoming Afghan conference, on the other hand, was the peace process he had led ten years earlier that ended the Lebanese civil war. While external actors, including Israel, Syria, and the United States, had all exercised influence, only the Lebanese parties had been actual participants in those negotiations.

In the end, Brahimi hit upon a happy medium. All of the states with influence on the Afghan parties would be invited to send representatives, who would live and work in the same facility as the Afghans. But only the Afghans and the UN team would actually participate in the negotiations. Their formal meetings

would be closed to all national representatives, including myself, but we would all nevertheless have ample opportunity to follow the proceedings and lobby the various Afghan factions on the margins of their formal sessions.

Almost immediately upon my arrival in Bonn, I received a message from the Iranian delegation asking to meet. This did not come as a complete surprise. I had told Brahimi that I hoped to be able to work with the Iranians, and asked him to pass along my expectation. During this first encounter, the Iranian representatives raised the name of Hamid Karzai as an acceptable candidate to lead the new Afghan government, a suggestion I had already received from both the government of Pakistan and the foreign minister of the Northern Alliance, otherwise bitter enemies. Based on this and other Iranian remarks, it was clear that our objectives for this meeting, and the governance of post-Taliban Afghanistan, were largely coincident.

The dynamics of the conference continued to throw us together. All of the delegates, Afghan and international, were working, eating, and sleeping in the same facility—a large guest house maintained by the German government. The meetings took place during the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. All the Afghans on this occasion were particularly assiduous in this regard. The Iranian delegation, on the other hand, chose to take advantage of the provision in Shi'a religious practice under which travelers can postpone their fast until they return home. As a result, we were sometimes together at meals in an otherwise largely deserted dining room and took to having coffee together each morning as well.

Several days into the meeting, Brahimi circulated the first draft of a declaration intended to record the results of the conference, establish an interim government for Afghanistan, and provide it with a provisional constitution. Sitting over morning coffee and cakes, the Iranian representative, Javad Zarif, and I, joined by several other delegates, examined the text for the first time. Zarif, who had apparently gotten up a bit earlier than the rest of us, announced that the document was missing several elements.

“Oh,” I responded noncommittally, not wanting to admit that I had not yet read through it myself.

“The text makes no mention of democracy or elections,” Zarif said. “Don’t you think that the new Afghan regime should commit to hold democratic elections?”

The Bush administration in 2001 had not yet embraced democratization as its strategy for dampening support for extremism throughout the Middle East. My instructions only called for the formation of a broadly based, representative regime in Kabul. On the other hand, this seemed a hard proposition to take issue with.

“Yes, of course,” I agreed.

“Furthermore,” Zarif continued, “the draft makes no mention of terrorism. Should the new Afghan regime be committed to cooperate with the international community to combat international terrorism?”

It was apparent, by this point, that Zarif was having a bit of fun at my expense, co-opting themes more usually connected with American rhetoric. He was, however, also making a serious point: Washington was fond of characterizing the Iranian regime as a fundamentalist theocracy. The truth was more complex. Iran wasn’t Switzerland, but at that point it was more democratic than Egypt and less fundamentalist than Saudi Arabia, two of the United States’ most important allies in the region. Iran’s parliament and president were popularly elected in hard fought contests, the most recent of which had reelected the moderate, reformist Khatami regime that Zarif represented. Even the supreme leader, the successor to Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, had been chosen, formally at least, by a council of popularly elected clerics. None of these ballots was free or fair, but the Iranian people did, in those years, enjoy somewhat more influence over the choice of their leaders than did most other populations in the Middle East.

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On terrorism, Tehran had long been an opponent of both the Taliban and al Qaeda. With regards to Afghanistan, therefore, Zarif was perfectly sincere in representing Iran’s pro-democracy, anti-terrorism stance. Tehran did want to see free elections in Afghanistan, and it did want al Qaeda’s influence eliminated. Had we been addressing the situations in Lebanon or Palestinian territories, U.S. and Iranian

views on democracy and terrorism would be further apart. For Afghanistan, however, our objectives in this respect were similar. Zarif’s suggestions were in due course incorporated by the Afghans into what became known as the Bonn Declaration.

Another provision eventually included in that document called for the dispatch of international peacekeepers. Neither Washington nor Tehran was enthusiastic about the creation of such a force. The Bush administration did not want to take on responsibility for peacekeeping, and the Iranian leadership did not want to see large numbers of U.S. troops next door. With the aid of my British colleague, we were able to whittle down the call for peacekeepers to a request limited geographically to the capital, Kabul.

No sooner had the issue been resolved in Bonn that I read in the next morning’s press that Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi of Iran was publicly questioning the need for any international peacekeepers in Afghanistan.

Encountering Zarif at breakfast, I asked accusingly why the minister was opposing an international security force for Kabul after the two of us had agreed that one was necessary. Zarif smiled laughingly and responded that I should regard Kharrazi's remarks "as a gesture of solidarity with Don Rumsfeld. After all, Jim, we are both way out ahead of our instructions on this issue, aren't we?" I acknowledged that we were and felt reassured that the Iranians would not try to undo the arrangement that had been reached.

To this point, my exchanges with Zarif and his Iranian colleagues had been generally constructive, though I remained concerned about the follow through. Several Afghan delegates with strong ties to Tehran, in particular those from the Hazara community of Afghani Shi'as, were continuing to disagree on points that Zarif and I had agreed upon. In discussion with these Afghans, I made a point of noting that the Iranian and U.S. delegations were of one mind on these issues. My interlocutors responded disbelievingly: "You are naive to believe that the Iranians are supporting the same position as you," one of the Shi'a leaders told me.

During our next morning coffee together, I recounted this conversation to Zarif, and urged that we be transparent with each other about our agreements and disagreements: "If we do not all do our utmost to promote a conclusive outcome here in Bonn, this effort will falter, and it will be a long time before we get a second chance." Zarif and his colleagues listened carefully and made no objection. My sense was that they probably had been relying on the U.S. side to carry the burden of pressing unpalatable propositions on the Afghans. It also seemed likely that the Iranians were a good deal more concerned about even a minimal role for Zahir Shah, the 89-year-old former king of Afghanistan, than they had let on in their conversations with me. They may have felt that to openly acknowledge this anxiety would have betrayed a weakness that the U.S. side could have exploited. Nothing was further from my own intentions. On the other hand, several European delegations did openly favor a royal restoration, and this made the Iranian delegation wary. Whatever had happened before, Zarif and his colleagues seemed to take my appeal seriously. When we checked the next day with the Afghans in question, they confirmed that the Iranian and U.S. positions were now aligned.

On the last night of the conference, everything had been settled except the most important: Who was going to govern Afghanistan? Everyone had agreed on the interim constitution and Karzai as the chairman of the interim administration, but there was no accord on who else would make up that administration and run the various ministries. Well past midnight, Brahimi asked to see me. Things were again at an impasse. The Northern Alliance delegate, Younis Qanooni, on instructions from Kabul, was insisting that his faction not only retain the three most important ministries—defense, foreign affairs, and interior—but also hold three-fourths of the total. These demands

were unacceptable to the other three Afghan factions represented in Bonn. Unless the Northern Alliance demand could be significantly reduced, there was no way the resultant government could be portrayed as broadly based and representative.

Brahimi said Qanooni was adamant, and could not be moved further. I suggested that we assemble the other national envoys and try as a group to persuade Qanooni to moderate his demands. Brahimi agreed, and I went to round up those representatives who could still be found at this time of night. Fifteen minutes later, we assembled around Brahimi's dining room table. In addition to Brahimi, the group consisted of the German, Indian, Iranian, and Russian delegates. Qanooni arrived, looked around the room and saw that he was in for a difficult session. For the next two hours, we took turns explaining to him why the Northern Alliance could not expect to retain the three power ministries while also insisting upon holding most of the rest. Qanooni responded that his faction had already conceded the most important slot to Karzai, a member of another faction. He argued that he and his colleagues had been fighting in the hills for the past decade, while all the other claimants to office had been living in comfortable exile. Furthermore, the Northern Alliance was a coalition of many factions, all of which were insisting on representation in the new government. This latter point, we understood, was the core of his problem.

Several expedients were explored. We suggested dividing existing portfolios to create more posts. We proposed inventing one or two new ministries. Qanooni remained adamant. Meanwhile, the clock was ticking. The chancellor of Germany, Gerhard Schröder, was due to arrive shortly for a 10am closing ceremony. But without agreement on the composition of the government, the resultant accord would be meaningless.

Finally Zarif stood up, and signaled Qanooni to join him in the corner of the room. They spoke in whispers for no more than a minute. Qanooni then returned to the table and offered to give up two ministries. He also agreed to create three new ones that could be awarded to other factions. We had a deal. For the following six months, Afghanistan would be governed by an interim administration composed of 29 department heads plus a chairman. Sixteen of these posts would go to the Northern Alliance, just slightly more than half.

Two weeks later, Karzai and his government were inaugurated in Kabul. General Tommy Franks and I represented the United States. Iran had the most senior delegation, headed by Kharrazi. There had been some doubt about whether Ismail Khan, the dominant warlord in the area closest to Iran, was going to support this settlement. Kharrazi landed in Herat, picked Khan up, put him on the plane, and brought him to Kabul just to make sure no one doubted that he was going to support the conclusion.

Further Overtures

In early January of 2002, at a donors conference in Tokyo, Iran pledged \$540 million in assistance to Afghanistan, assistance which by and large they've since delivered. This was by far the largest amount promised by any non-OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) country. The U.S. pledge, by comparison, was merely \$290 million, little more than half that of Iran.

Emerging from a larger gathering in Tokyo, one of the Iranian representatives took me aside to reaffirm his government's desire to continue to cooperate on Afghanistan. I agreed that this would be desirable, but warned that Iranian behavior in other areas represented an obstacle to cooperation. Furthermore, I cautioned him by saying that my brief only extends to Afghanistan. He replied by saying, "We know that. We would like to work on these other issues with the appropriate people in your government." I responded that incidents similar to the *Karine A* incident—a Palestinian ship loaded with several tons of weapons of Iranian origin that had been intercepted a few days earlier by the Israeli navy—were not helpful. The Iranian diplomat expressed concern and stated that "President Khatemi met earlier this week with his National Security Council. He asked whether any of the agency heads present knew about this shipment. All of them denied any knowledge. If your government has information on the origin of these weapons that it can provide us, that would be most helpful."

Neither October 1 step goes to the heart of international concern with Iran's nuclear program.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, then-U.S. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, also in Tokyo, was at the receiving end of a parallel approach. Sadako Ogata, the head of Japan's development assistance agency, asked to see O'Neill to pass on a message from the Iranian government. Ogata told O'Neil that the Iranians wanted to open a dialogue with Washington covering all of the issues that divided the two countries.

On returning to Washington, O'Neill and I reported these conversations, he to then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and his cabinet level colleagues, and I to the Middle Eastern Bureau at the Department of State (DOS). No one evinced any interest. The Iranians received no private reply. Instead, they received a very public answer. One week later, in his State of the Union address, President George W. Bush named Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, an "axis of evil."¹ How arch-enemies Iran and Iraq could form any axis, evil or otherwise, was never explained. His remarks raised the prospect of

preemptive military action against all three states to halt the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. There was no mention whatsoever of Iran's support for the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan.

Tehran nevertheless persisted in its attempts to cooperate with the United States. Two months later, the Iranians asked to speak to me privately once again, this time on the fringes of a larger meeting of potential donors I had arranged in Geneva to talk about helping Afghanistan rebuild its army and police force. We gathered in the coffee shop of the Intercontinental Hotel where we were all staying. They brought with them the Iranian general, in full uniform, who had commanded their assistance mission to the Northern Alliance throughout the recent war.

"My government is prepared to participate in an American-led program of support to the new Afghan army," the general said. "Specifically, Iran is prepared to build barracks for and train up to 20,000 troops as part of the larger effort under your leadership." I responded warily that if Iran trains some Afghan troops and the United States trains others, the two groups might end up with incompatible military doctrines. The general replied with a smile: "Don't worry, we are still using the manuals you left behind in 1979." Acknowledging this point, I persisted that even if they had compatible training, the recruits might emerge with conflicting loyalties. "Iran has trained, equipped, and by the way, we are *still* paying the Afghan troops your military is now using to hunt down remaining Taliban elements," the general responded. "Are you having any difficulty with their loyalty?"

"No," I admitted, "not that I know of." I promised to report the offer back to Washington.

This unexpected offer struck me as problematic in detail but promising in its overall implications. Despite the general's assurances, I could foresee problems having Iran and the United States train different components of a new Afghan army. On the other hand, Iranian participation, under U.S. leadership, in a joint program of this sort would be a breathtaking advance after more than twenty years of mutual hostility. It also represented a significant step beyond the quiet diplomatic cooperation we had achieved so far. Despite having been relegated to the "axis of evil," the Khatemi government still wanted to deepen its cooperation with Washington and was prepared to do so publicly.

Back home, I immediately went to see then-Secretary of State Colin Powell. "Very interesting," he responded to my account of this conversation. "You need to talk to Condi."

So I went to see Rice. "Interesting," she said. "You need to talk to Don."

A few days later, Rice arranged a meeting of the principal National Security Council members to discuss the Iranian offer, among other matters.

When we came to that item on the agenda, I again recounted my conversation with the Iranians. Rumsfeld did not look up from the papers he was perusing. When I finished, he made no comment and asked no questions. Neither did anyone else. After a long pause, seeing no one ready to take up the issue, Rice moved the meeting on to the next item on her agenda. Again, the Iranians never received a response.

It was only several years later, on reading the memoirs of former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), George Tenet, that I learned that two Department of Defense (DOD) members of my team in Bonn had left in the midst of our negotiations to attend a clandestine meeting in Rome with people whom Tenet characterized as “violent” opponents of the Iranian regime.² Tenet has not specified the identity of these individuals, but speculation has centered on the Mujahidin al Khalk, a cultish group of Iranian exiles characterized by the DOS as terrorists. In this meeting, the DOD emissaries broached the possibility of U.S. financial support for their interlocutors’ efforts to overthrow the Iranian regime. This money, they explained, was to be channeled through the Pentagon rather than the DOS or CIA. Months later, on learning of these contacts, Tenet and Powell both tried to close this channel down. They succeeded in blocking such payments, although further contacts reportedly took place.

I can still recall the contemporaneous debates among U.S. officials whether the positive and negative elements of Iranian behavior evident at the time revealed a real split between “moderate” and “hard-liner” elements within that regime, or were simply two strands of consciously manipulative and implacably adversarial Iranian policy. Hard-liners in Washington consistently advanced the second thesis. Looking back, one must acknowledge that Iranian officials faced a similar puzzle in trying to reconcile my behavior in Bonn with that of my colleagues in Rome, assuming they knew of the latter meeting, which seems quite possible.

Not yet dissuaded, Tehran made another effort to engage the Bush administration a year later. This approach was more formal and far-reaching, encompassing offers of cooperation on nuclear technology, Iraq, terrorism, and Middle East peace as well as Afghanistan. The Iranian offer was conveyed through the Swiss government, which was responsible for representing U.S. interests in Tehran. This proposal, like its predecessor, was never seriously considered in Washington and once again the Iranians never received a response.

Sanctions and negotiations are not alternatives.

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By 2003, the Khatemi government had made substantial overtures of cooperation to Washington twice, first after the U.S. victory in Afghanistan, and again after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It is not hard to guess what motivated these initiatives. The Iranian leadership was both thankful and fearful—thankful that the United States had eliminated its two most dangerous regional

rivals, and fearful that their own regime would be next.

U.S. officials have never explained in any detail why they ignored the Iranian overtures of 2002 and 2003, but the logic seems apparent: the United States was on a roll. Its position was constantly strengthening, while Tehran's was steadily declining. If the Khatemi regime was feeling grateful and vulnerable, the Bush administration had every reason to feel self-satisfied and near invincible. Why settle with Iran's revolutionary government when an opportunity to replace it might be just around the corner? Afghanistan's Mullah Mohammed Omar and Iraq's Saddam Hussein had each been overthrown in little more than a year. Might not the regime in Tehran follow in due course? Even if the United States ultimately chose to deal with Iran, wouldn't the U.S. position be further enhanced by the consolidation of pro-U.S. democracies in Afghanistan and Iraq? Iran's offers of cooperation were steadily sweetening. Why not wait a while longer before responding?

That is not what happened, of course. Afghanistan and Iraq descended into civil war. Mohammad Khatemi was replaced in 2005 by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Throughout the remainder of the Bush administration, the U.S. geopolitical position weakened while Tehran's strengthened.

President Barack Obama holds a much weaker hand in dealing with Iran than did his predecessor in 2001 or 2003. The United States is tied down militarily in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. and global economy are wounded and still fragile. According to U.S. intelligence, Iran halted its clandestine nuclear weapons program in 2003 but its civil nuclear program has continued to progress, bringing that country six years closer to the point where it can manufacture and deploy nuclear weapons if it chooses to do so.

Obama can not, therefore, pick up the dialogue with Tehran where it was left in 2003. Nevertheless, the experience of cooperation over Afghanistan, and incipient cooperation over Iraq, remains relevant, a reminder of what was once possible and could be again. Iranian and U.S. interests in Afghanistan and Iraq are largely compatible, if not concurrent. They offered a good place to start any effort at rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

Moving Toward Engagement

In 2008, Obama campaigned in support of engagement with Iran. After entering office, he sought to establish a dialogue with the Islamic Republic by neither imposing conditions on Iran nor offering preemptive concessions of his own. Obama issued a public message to the Iranian people on the occasion of the Persian New Year. He also reportedly sent two private missives to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The leadership in Tehran, however, in an attempt to stay away from a sensitive and divisive topic during the campaign season, proved unwilling to initiate talks prior to their June 12 presidential elections. Throughout the first half of 2009, Washington waited more or less patiently, assuming that Ahmadinejad would probably win reelection and anticipating that the regime was likely to open direct contacts thereafter.

Events did not unfold exactly as Washington expected. The official Iranian announcement of Ahmadinejad's sweeping first round victory set off massive public protests, which in turn provoked numerous arrests and large show trials of regime critics. The effect slowed, at least temporarily, the momentum on both sides toward any sort of rapprochement.

Obama persisted in offering talks but refrained from further gestures of good will or explicit overtures. The leadership in Tehran, for its part, initially remained inwardly focused as it sought to deal with the crisis of legitimacy set in train by the suspect election results. Numerous fissures have opened up, not just between supporters and opponents of Ahmadinejad, but among those who accept the election results, who have differing views about how to handle the resultant popular resistance and the composition of the resultant government.

The First Contact

In September, Iran offered to return to multilateral negotiations, provided these addressed a wider range of issues than just its nuclear program. On October 1, the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, along with Germany) met with Iranian representatives in Geneva. The U.S. and Iranian participants also had a brief private meeting. The Iranian's agreed to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency access to their newly revealed second enrichment facility near the holy city of Qom, and to export some enriched uranium to be converted into fuel abroad, a commitment on which they have since balked. If fulfilled, these promises would have represented constructive steps. Yet, neither goes to the heart of the international concern with Iran's nuclear program.

It is encouraging that Tehran and Washington are finally in direct contact. But this probably only buys Tehran a brief respite. The Obama administration

seems likely to seek another round of international sanctions on Iran by the end of 2009 if these multilateral talks fail to make real progress. These new restrictions will be intended to serve several purposes, most obviously to influence the Iranian regime, but also to fend off Israeli pressure for military measures and to discourage other Middle Eastern states from following Iran down the path toward nuclear weapons.

Predictions beyond that point are more difficult. The Iranian regime could evolve over the next year or two in a variety of directions. It might move more clearly toward a police state, in the process losing its Islamic and its republican character, as the clerics and the democratic reformers cede influence to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC). At the other extreme, popular resistance could reignite, and this time secure more support from religious elements of the establishment unhappy with the IGRC ascendance. Perhaps the most likely outcome will be some uneasy equilibrium between the three forces—Islamic, repressive, and republican—leaving Iran in much the same condition as it has experienced over the past thirty years.

It is not clear that stiffened sanctions would push this process in the right direction. Measures that would principally affect the population as a whole rather

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than the elites, such as a ban on the export of gasoline to Iran, could definitely get the Iranian public's attention, assuming that the embargo was widely respected. The populace, however, might be more inclined to blame Washington for the subsequent sacrifices than their own leadership. U.S. critics of Obama's engagement policy have argued that it legitimizes the regime and undermines those seeking to reform it. Interestingly, the reformers do not seem to have adopted this

view, and instead have been cautioning against further sanctions. If the U.S. Congress moves to impose an embargo on refined oil products, it may be acting contrary to the advice of those it is purporting to help.

Faced with the choice between doing nothing, strengthening sanctions, or launching a military strike, Obama is likely to opt for the middle way. His chances of getting international support for that course have been somewhat improved by the controversy over Iran's recent presidential elections, the subsequent crackdown on dissidents, and the revelation of a second, hitherto clandestine, enrichment facility. China and Russia, however, are not likely to agree to more than a modest expansion in current international sanctions, and that only after a further period probing Iranian intentions. Unilateral restrictions enacted by Congress would be unlikely to have a major impact on Iran and

could, indeed, spark a counterproductive row with U.S. allies, actually weakening the overall sanctions regime.

Obama may eventually also come under pressure to put the military option back on the table. Bush, in his second term, did not return to the explicit threats of preemption contained in his 2001 State of the Union speech and in the National Security Strategy issued by the White House later that year.³ Nevertheless, his administration also made clear, when asked, that the alternative of military force to halt the nuclear program remained a possibility. The Obama administration has so far discounted the utility of force against Iran. It has not, however, ruled it out entirely.

There is good reason not to resuscitate this threat. Coercive diplomacy has a bad record. Coercion itself can produce results if one is prepared to pay the costs in blood and treasure of implementing threats, but the threats themselves, particularly if made publicly, usually cause the other side to harden its position. One has only to recall Saddam Hussein's response to U.S. warnings of imminent military action in Iraq, both in 1991 and again in 2003, to know that even the most credible threat of the most overwhelming force does not reliably cause even the weakest adversary to back down. The defiance of former president of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, toward NATO's ultimatum in the spring of 1999 is another example of failed coercive diplomacy.

There can be an honest debate over whether war with Iran—instigated by either the United States or Israel—is preferable to living with an Iranian nuclear capability and acting to deter its use. If Obama becomes convinced that war is the better option, then threatening a preemptive attack is a reasonable prelude to launching one—a gesture designed both to give fair warning and secure domestic and international support. But employing the threat as a negotiating tactic, designed to shake the resolve and modify the positions of one's interlocutor, is a ploy more likely to produce armed conflict than accommodation.

Getting the Best Result

For thirty years, Washington and Tehran have communicated only intermittently and then usually at low levels. Given the distrust and misunderstanding that have built up on both sides, it would be remarkable if the recent reestablishment of higher level contact led to early breakthroughs. Yet, while engagement may not always produce accommodation, but it always yields information, which helps to create better policy. Thus, even failed negotiations are better than no negotiation at all.

Obama has said that he is not willing to negotiate indefinitely and that if Iran does not move soon on the central issues of its nuclear program, the United States

will seek additional sanctions. This is a false dichotomy. Sanctions and negotiations are not alternatives, and there is no reason for the United States to deny itself one means of influencing Iran because it is employing another, though it may be a while until opportunities for rapprochement, which the United States offered in 2001 and 2003, to reappear. U.S. officials will be in a far better position to assess and act on such opportunities—when and if they occur—if they have developed better information on Iran’s intentions and some ongoing insight into its internal policy debates. Clandestine intelligence may provide occasional insights on such matters, but the simplest approach to gathering such information is to simply ask, and this often also produces the best results.

Notes

1. “Bush State of the Union Address,” CNN.com, January 29, 2002, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/01/29/bush.speech.txt/>.
2. George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 313–315.
3. See “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” September 2002, p. 30, <http://merln.ndu.edu/whitepapers/USnss2002.pdf>.