

By Amitai Etzioni

Time to make a deal with Iran

A non-aggression treaty would give the U.S. the best chance to keep nuclear weapons out of reach



By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

Iran has had its say over the past few months, defiantly pronouncing to the rest of the world what it will or won't do regarding its nuclear program.

Now the world will have its chance to speak, and if the diplomacy unfolding at the United Nations stalls, the United States should be ready to step to the fore before the crisis escalates further.

The U.N. Security Council will meet, most likely this week, to review a report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Iran continues to defy the international community with its program to enrich uranium. Though sanctions are an option, don't hold your breath, as China and Russia have indicated that they might not be willing to go that far.

And when it comes to the Iranian regime and its president, sanctions apparently aren't much of a threat anyway. Before the IAEA report was released Friday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said no U.N. resolution could force Iran to give up its nuclear program. "The Iranian nation won't give a damn about such useless resolutions," he said.

What can be done? The U.N. should continue down the path of diplomacy, as the United States backs its efforts. But the Bush administration, which recently has thrown money at fomenting regime change, should be poised to act if the Security Council's efforts reach a dead end.

Regime change policy

A few years ago, reformers in Iran invited a small group of Westerners, myself included, to spend 10 days there. I have stayed in touch with the reformers by e-mail and in one-on-one meetings in Europe. Based on their observations and beliefs, American support for regime change only damages their cause and makes the mullahs dig their heels in deeper. Thus, though funding opposition groups and undercutting the mullahs might look good on paper, in practice it's a recipe for failure.

Instead, the United States should offer Iran a bargain: No Iranian nukes, no American-induced regime change. The United States would need to commit to not attacking Iran unless Iran attacked the United States or a U.S. ally. In addition, the Bush administration would not seek to undermine the regime by arming or financing opposition groups (whose legitimacy in Iran is undercut by American support anyway). After all, few governments would be willing to bargain in good faith when the other

party wants to kick them out of office. What would Iran have to do? Abandon its nuclear program.

There is little to be lost in such a deal — and much to be gained. The reformers I have spoken with, including Ataollah Mohajerani, a top leader of the movement, have made it clear that they are eager to see the end of the theocracy, but they point out that they are first and foremost Iranian patriots. If the United States attacks, they will fight *with* their government *against* the Americans.

Instead, the United States should offer to cease its efforts to undermine the mullahs' regime and agree to sign a non-aggression treaty in exchange for Iran opening itself up to rigorous inspections of its nuclear facilities. This would ensure that their use is limited to civilian purposes and that Iran does not enrich uranium; instead it could purchase it ready-made, say, from Russia, which has been trying to secure just such an arrangement.

The main benefit of such a deal is clear. An Iran armed with nuclear weapons could slip some to terrorists, use nuclear-armed missiles to

hit U.S. allies such as Israel, pressure its neighbors, and encourage other nations to develop nuclear arms. Less obvious is that the sacrifices involved in such a deal are actually quite small — because there is little that the United States can do to engineer regime change in Iran. Moreover, the desired changes are already coming about as a result of internal developments, which are likely to unfold more quickly if they are not tainted by CIA involvement or other forms of U.S. support.

What the mullahs see

Why would the mullahs accept such a deal? From their viewpoint, Iran is encircled by U.S. forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Furthermore, they are faced with saber-rattling by the Bush administration through its public exploration of military options. The mullahs realize that even if the U.S. military strikes were to miss some of Iran's nuclear sites, the country's industrial base and infrastructure could be devastated. Hence, the mullahs might well find a non-aggression treaty quite appealing.

Selig Harrison, director of the Asia Program at the Center for International Policy in Washington, is among those who has written that Tehran asked European Union representatives to obtain security commitments from Washington in exchange for Iran restraining its nuclear arms — but to no avail.

It's time to change course. The United States should offer this deal to Iran, and to North Korea, which also has sought a non-aggression treaty with the United States. In this case as well, limiting our goals to deproliferation and indicating our willingness to leave regime changes to the Koreans is a bargain well worth offering.

If success accompanies these overtures, the Bush administration could rightly claim that the final two members of the "axis of evil" have been dealt with — this time, without firing a single missile.

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