



The need for a big stick

For the Iranian nuclear disarmament process to work, economic sanctions must be backed by the threat of military force

MIDDLE EAST arms control is suddenly back on the agenda and critical negotiations are underway – on both Syrian chemical weapons and Iran’s nuclear program.

And while it would be easy to dismiss the dramatic events as largely unrealistic political hype, there are some successful precedents. In contrast to decades of failure in North Korea, the unrelenting inspections in Iraq eventually ended Saddam Hussein’s nuclear ambitions and led to the regime’s downfall.

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The key to disarmament in Syria and Iran is continuous military pressure, reflecting what academics and policy makers refer to as “coercive diplomacy.”

In Libya, a nervous Muammar Gaddafi gave up his chemical stockpiles and the uranium enrichment technology used to make nuclear weapons immediately after the US military deposed Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The Libyan dictator suddenly reversed course, welcoming British

and American teams to rid his country of nuclear materials – the sooner the better. Libya also quickly signed and ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Teams from The Hague-based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) then began the arduous task of neutralizing hundreds of tons in this deadly arsenal.

In contrast, the case of North Korea illustrates the disappointing results of arms control agreements in which there is no coercive threat. For years, Pyongyang successfully exploited American engagement and diplomacy to expand its illicit nuclear program, only accepting limitations to avert an imminent military strike, and then reneging as soon as the pressure receded.

In 1994, the Clinton Administration celebrated North Korea’s pledge to freeze and then dismantle its nuclear weapons program under International Atomic Energy Agency supervision. The US then withdrew its naval force, and the IAEA inspectors found their access blocked. Satellites and other intelligence platforms reported that plutonium production had resumed, and the Americans responded with conferences. A few years later, North Korea had nuclear weapons.

The failure was not a result of secret programs hidden from spy satellites and other intelligence capabilities, but stemmed rather from the lack of political will to use force when violations were detected.

Instead, the amorphous “international community,” led loosely by the US, resort-

ed to economic pressure – a much weaker form of coercion. Even the most stringent sanctions imaginable did not divert North Korea from its goal.

In Tehran, every move in the North Korean process was studied carefully and successfully emulated for two decades. Indeed, the Iranians learned to move even more carefully than the North Koreans, advancing slowly and avoiding extreme isolation and its economic consequences. In October 2003, after the invasion of Iraq, the chief Iranian nuclear diplomat and current president Hassan Rouhani negotiated what was celebrated as a “historic agreement with the Europeans,” who were trying their hands at arms control while the Americans were busy in Iraq.

On paper, they were successful and Iran, fearing a possible diversion of American forces from Iraq, pledged full cooperation in exchange for economic and other assistance from Europe. For a few months, the IAEA inspectors were given greater access to enrichment facilities where illegal activities had been identified. But, as in the North Korean case, this ended when the American military operation in Iraq began to unravel, and the basis for coercive diplomacy collapsed. As Rouhani later boasted, “While we were talking to the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in Isfahan.”

But perhaps unusually in global politics, lessons seem to have been learned from the failures in Korea and Iran, and are being applied, beginning in Syria, with an



eye towards Iran. Following the Assad regime's horrendous use of chemical weapons in killing over 1000 people in late August, and under the threat of a US military strike, a detailed agreement was brokered by the Russians at the last minute.

A tight timetable specified concrete milestones for the removal of Syria's chemical arsenal. Implementation began immediately, with the submission of an inventory list, the arrival of inspectors from the OPCW, and the first steps in dismantling chemical weapons production plants. The regime recognized that while the Russians had provided a shield from US President Barack Obama's planned attack, any deviation from the agreement could remove this umbrella.

NEVERTHELESS, SKEPTICS note that Assad still has a number of ways to delay and ultimately avoid implementing the agreement in full. The removal or destruction of 1,000 tons of chemical weapons, dispersed among at least 40 locations in war-torn Syria, will take at least two years. Under normal circumstances, such disposal and destruction operations would take even longer, because of the great care taken to avoid environmental and health damage.

But in the unique Syrian civil war environment, the process can be accelerated, as long as the Assad regime has an interest in cooperating. All of the storage sites are reportedly under the Assad military's total control and the transportation of de-

molition crews and equipment can be expedited. Mobile incineration facilities may not be the best way to get rid of these inhumane weapons, but they can do the job. With American, Russian and presumably Israeli intelligence assets watching every detail, attempts to hide or move significant quantities of materials to avoid destruction are almost certain to be detected.

From the Iranian perspective, the return of coercive diplomacy in Syria, based on extensive cooperation between Russia and America, is a major concern. Perhaps for the first time, Iran will have difficulty in dragging out negotiations interminably, as well as in making and then immediately breaking agreements. In the current context, pressure for a quick and readily verifiable agreement is intense, and international agencies, such as the IAEA, will get the necessary political backing for quick and accurate reporting of any violations.

Highly sophisticated satellite and other sensors will supplement the IAEA reports, as in the exposure of the Parchin site, where the evidence shows that nuclear detonators were tested. In addition, coordination in the UN Security Council will avoid the lengthy debates and delays, which have benefited Iran for many years.

For Rouhani and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the best outcome under current circumstances would be an agreement that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has referred to as a "bad deal," based on the North Korean model. A "bad" agreement would lift economic sanctions, which are

threatening the survival of the regime, in return for a freeze on enrichment, plus future pledges to dismantle key sites.

In practice, however, this would allow Iran to maintain some or all of its uranium enrichment plants intact, as well as the plutonium production reactor at Arak. And, as in the case of North Korea, after the storm has blown over, the pieces will still be in place to resume activities at these sites and create a "breakout" situation: that is enough fissile material to produce one or more nuclear weapons relatively quickly.

In contrast, if the Syrian precedent is followed, the Iranians will not get their "bad deal," and instead will be coerced into taking immediate steps towards dismantling facilities used for nuclear weapons development. Such an agreement would prevent Iran from stalling and would not allow it to escape significant consequences for violating the terms, the way it did in 2003.

If the Americans and other powers want to avoid a North Korean scenario, which would threaten their vital interests, they must insist that the same stringent requirements in the Syrian agreement be written into any deal with Iran. And for the process to work, they must maintain the economic sanctions backed by the threat of military force. All options must be on the table, and they must be credible. ■

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