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**IRAN CAN'T AGREE TO A DAMN THING**

*Patrick Clawson*

[\*Foreign Policy\*](#), Feb. 20, 2013

During the chaotic days of Iran's Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the country's emerging "supreme leader," assured Iranians that their supposed oppressor, the United States, would not be able to put the hated shah back on his throne. "America can't do a damn thing against us," he inveighed, a winning line that became the uprising's unofficial slogan. It's a catchphrase Iran has deployed time and again since....

Khomeini's slogan was true enough at the time: There wasn't much U.S. President Jimmy Carter could do to intervene in one of the most stunning uprisings in history. But today, when it comes to Iran's endless nuclear impasse with the West, one might turn the phrase back on the Iranians: The problem, in a nutshell, is that Iran can't agree to a damn thing.

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Indeed, the slow pace of nuclear negotiations with Iran are only the beginning of the reasons to be discouraged about resolution of the standoff. More worrying is that political infighting in Tehran is so bad that Iran might not be able to bring itself to accept unilateral U.S. unconditional surrender were it to be offered. To be sure, eight months between negotiating sessions — June 18-19, 2012 in Moscow, followed by the upcoming session slated for Feb. 26 in Almaty, Kazakhstan — is bad news enough. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon hit the nail on the head when he warned last week, "We should not give much more time to the Iranians, and we should not waste time. We have seen what happened with [North Korea]. It ended up that they [were] secretly, quietly, without any obligations, without any pressure, making progress" on nuclear weapons.

But the pace of talks is only the beginning of the problem. More important is the political meltdown among the Islamic Republic's leaders. Their problems should help put ours in perspective. Many Americans think Washington faces gridlock from hyper-partisan politics, though in fact Iran is an exception to that rule. Bills about Iran's nuclear program typically enjoy stunning levels of support — 100 to 0 in the Senate in the December 2011 round of sanctions. In the November 2012 vote on another sanctions round, several senators were absent, so the vote was a cliffhanger 94 to 0.

By contrast, Iranian leaders fight about everything, even where vital national security interests are at stake. In many respects, a divided Iran is nothing new. The Islamic Republic has from its beginning been characterized by sharp internal divisions. And that has long influenced debate about policy toward the United States. For at least 20 years, the rule in Iran has been: Whoever is out of power wants talks with the United States, which they know would be popular, while whoever is in power moves haltingly if at all toward talks. Several times, those on the outs became the ins and then quickly shifted position on relations with Washington. When Mohammad Khatami was running for president in 1997, he was all in favor of talks with the Great Satan, but then once in power, he did little if anything and refused to speak clearly on the issue. And so too with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: When he was riding high, he only had disdain for the

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United States, but as he got into trouble at home, he called for talks with Washington.

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But now, the situation is much worse than before. It used to be that once Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, spoke, that ended the debate, but no longer. Khamenei no longer enjoys the respect nor commands the power to stop the infighting. No matter how often or bluntly he rejects the idea of negotiations with the United States, other important officials — most loudly and frequently, Ahmadinejad — call for such talks.

Khamenei couches his call for obedience as a need for unity and vigilance in the face of the enemy. A typical speech on January 29 warned, "Today the world of Islam is faced with the plot of enemies... We should not fuel the fire of discord by arousing shallow and vulgar feelings. This will burn the fate of nations. It will completely destroy them. It will help the enemies of Islam." Consistent with his longstanding reluctance to publicly weigh in directly on political disputes, Khamenei has usually confined himself to elliptical criticisms, such as his warning in a Feb. 7 speech to Air Force commanders, "The improper conduct which is witnessed in certain areas from certain government officials — they should end this." He concluded with another strong call for unity.

Admonished by the supreme leader to close ranks, Iranian leaders promptly put on a full display of their bitter enmity. The Majlis, Iran's legislature, called in for questioning Labor Minister Reza Shaikholslami, a close ally of Ahmadinejad. In response, the Iranian president went to the Majlis for the Feb. 3 debate and insisted on accusing Speaker Ali Larijani and his family (including his brother Sadeqh Larijani, head of the judiciary) of corruption, playing a recording he claimed supported the charge. Ruled out of order, Ahmadinejad stormed out. The Majlis then voted Shaikholslami dismissed by a vote of 192 to 56; Ahmadinejad promptly added him to his official delegation leaving for Egypt. Five days after the Majlis brawl, 100 Ahmadinejad supporters pelted Ali Larijani with shoes, disrupting a speech he was trying to give in Qom.

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Khamenei was clearly appalled that neither his public admonitions nor his reported firm private orders had been enough to stop the feuding. So he lit into the two sides in a Feb. 16 address, saying, "What is the reason behind impeaching a minister a few months before the end of the life of the government, for a reason that had nothing to do with that minister? ... The head of one branch of power [Ahmadinejad] accused the two other branches of power based on a charge that was not raised or proved in a court...Such acts are against the sharia as well as the law and ethics." Turning to the disputes about corruption, he added, "I expect the officials to enhance their friendship at this time that enemies have intensified their [hostile] behavior. Be together more than before. Control your wild sentiments." He warned that if they did not follow his counsel, there would be grave consequences.

Khamenei was ignored again. Two days after this speech, the Supreme Court — largely controlled by Sadeq Larijani — upheld four death sentences against close Ahmadinejad allies in a high-profile corruption case. Neither the president nor his equally conservative, hard-line opponents seem to fear Khamenei or much respect his authority anymore.

By their actions, Iranian leaders are giving the strong impression that they are so preoccupied by their internal differences that they cannot agree on, well, a damn thing. Disunity helps the enemy, Khamenei frequently says. But the world powers negotiating with Iran would be glad to see more unity in Tehran, because a more unified Iranian government would be better able to reach a deal and then implement it. That seems less and less likely. The time is rapidly approaching when the big powers, or at least the United States, need to set out a stark choice for Iran's leaders: Either accept a generous offer to resolve the nuclear impasse or be prepared for the consequences.

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**THE US AND IRAN: PRE-NEGOTIATION MANEUVERING**

*Prof. Eytan Gilboa*

*[BESA Center](#), Feb. 19, 2013*

The United States and Iran are exchanging tough messages on possible negotiations towards a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear weapons crisis. Both sides are presenting conditions for direct negotiations, which would be the first of their kind. In international relations theory this phenomenon is called “pre-negotiation.” During this phase the sides calculate the benefits and drawbacks of the negotiating process itself and of a possible agreement.

They present tough opening positions which they know the other side can’t accept, and they attempt to obtain concessions from the other side just for agreeing to negotiate. This has been the negotiating style of both the Palestinians and the Iranians. It seems that the West in general and the United States in particular don’t know how to effectively handle this style.

During a February 2013 international security conference in Munich, American Vice President Joe Biden said that there “is still time...[and] space for diplomacy backed by pressure to succeed. The ball is in the government of Iran’s court.” He added that the discussions would be held on condition of a “real and tangible” Iranian offer. Biden hinted that the atmosphere surrounding previous negotiations was not serious, because Iran was not ready to make a single compromise; its sole purpose was to buy time and advance its drive to the nuclear bomb in the interim.

His message was clear: the United States will not agree to such negotiations, and will not remove sanctions merely in exchange for Iran’s entrance into deliberations. In his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama called upon Iranian leaders to “recognize that now is the time for a diplomatic solution, because a coalition stands united in demanding that they meet their obligations.” He concluded that the United States “will do what is necessary to

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The Iranian reply was immediate. The two Iranian leaders - the spiritual and more significant leader, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; and the political leader, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad - responded negatively and conditionally to Biden's invitation. We are ready for negotiations, they said, but only if the United States and the West announce support for Iran's right to a nuclear program, and on condition that the heavy sanctions against Iran are removed. It is obvious that the United States can't accept these demands, because the sanctions' removal would eliminate any chance, remote as they are, to stop the Iranian nuclear weapons program. The sanctions and the heavy damage they have inflicted on the Iranian economy pushed the Iranian leaders to seek negotiations, and suspending them now will eliminate any incentive they may have to compromise.

It is very possible that the tough stance of the Iranian leadership stems from its perception of the new senior appointments of the Obama Administration in foreign and national security affairs: John Kerry as Secretary of State and Chuck Hagel as the nominated Secretary of Defense. Both men are veterans of the Vietnam War and are almost fundamentally opposed to using any type of force to bring results. In the past, Hagel even opposed sanctions and claimed that it is impossible to halt the Iranian nuclear program. In his Senate testimony he also made an embarrassing statement by characterizing the Iranian regime as "legitimate."

The Iranian leaders interpreted these appointments, as well as Obama's and Biden's invitation to open talks, as signs of weakness to be exploited for advancing their nuclear weapons program and for setting tough conditions for negotiations. The Iranian leaders have also closely observed the North Korean defiance of the United States and the Western pressure to stop the testing of nuclear weapons and long range missiles, and could have concluded that the US warnings and intimidations are not credible....

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The current stalemate threatens to cripple Obama's Iranian strategy. He planned heavy sanctions that he hoped would soften the Iranian position and bring them to negotiations and direct discussions with a good chance to stop the bomb. It is apparent that the goals of the two sides contradict each other: America wants Iran to stop enriching its uranium, while Iran wants to end the sanctions. The Iranians know how to conduct negotiations much better than the Americans; they have thousands of years of experience in bazaar-like bargaining. Thus, if the United States and Iran reach an agreement to begin direct negotiations, the ultimate results may be favourable to the Iranians. The American desire to avoid the military option almost at any cost may produce a vague agreement which will still enable Iran to clandestinely continue developing nuclear weapons. If no direct negotiations are held, or if they are held but fail to stop Iran from continuing to develop nuclear weapons, and if Obama stands by his commitments to prevent Iran from building a nuclear bomb - the Administration may have no choice but to use military force.....

*Prof. Eytan Gilboa is Director of the School of Communication and Director of the Center for International Communication, both at Bar-Ilan University, and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.*

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**U.S. WEAKNESS PROVOKES N. KOREA AND IRAN**

*Max Boot*

[Commentary, Feb.12, 2013](#)



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So much for the exaggerated hopes of those that believed Kim Jong-un would turn out to be a different kind of dictator. Following a long-range rocket test in December, North Korea has now apparently tested a nuclear weapon bigger than any it has tested before. This, despite warnings not only from South Korea, Japan, and the United States, but also from China, not to test. Far from being the reformer as many naively imagined, Kim is showing himself a chip off the old dynastic bloc, once again using North Korea's weapons of mass destruction to posture before the world and no doubt to shake concessions out of the U.S., South Korea, and other states.

What makes this test truly disturbing is the close cooperation that is known to exist between Iran and North Korea in the development of ever-more destructive weaponry. The two countries have worked closely together on missiles and may well be working together on nuclear weapons. If so, the North Korean test is an indication of growing danger not only in Northeast Asia but also in the Middle East.

And what is the American response to this latest provocation? To his credit, President Obama has not repeated the pattern of his predecessors in trying to shower North Korea with aid to get it to desist from its dangerous behavior—a pattern that only subsidized North Korean malfeasance. Rather than trying to relaunch stalled six-party talks, he has actually pushed for the toughest sanctions yet on North Korea although their ability to actually coerce Pyongyang is limited as long as China refuses to cut off economic aid.

But these tough responses are undermined to a large extent by the symbolism of Obama proposing steep cuts in the American nuclear arsenal—from 1,700 to 1,000 warheads—in the State of the Union address on the very day when North Korea is testing a nuke and Iran is drawing closer to acquiring its own nukes. It is hard to know why the president imagines unilateral American cuts will encourage more responsible behavior from the likes of Iran and North Korea. The more likely consequence is to call into question America's deterrent capacity, an especially pressing issue if, as Bret Stephens argues in this Wall Street Journal column, China's nuclear arsenal is actually larger than commonly supposed.

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With the danger growing from both Iran and North Korea it is all the more incumbent on the US to reassure regional allies—from Saudi Arabia to South Korea—that they will be sheltered securely underneath the American nuclear umbrella. If we cut our own nuclear forces drastically, the credibility of our guarantees diminishes and the likelihood goes up that our allies will seek nuclear weapons of their own, potentially setting off two nuclear arms races.

Of course it is not just in the nuclear realm that the US is undertaking defense cuts. Our overall military budget is to undergo drastic cuts within weeks assuming that the Congress and White House do not reach an agreement to turn off the sequester. Already the military services are cutting back on readiness and training. The Navy, for one, has announced that the Persian Gulf area will for the time being have only one aircraft carrier battle group on station, rather than two.

It is hard to think of a more threatening prospect than unilateral American military reductions at a time when our enemies are growing stronger. Weakness, it is often said, is provocative. By that measure we are provoking two of the most dangerous rogue states in the world.

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**[Spy Fail: Why Iran is Losing Its Covert War with Israel:](#)** **Karl Vick, *Time World*, Feb. 13, 2013**—Slumped in a Nairobi courtroom, suit coats rumpled and reading glasses dangling from librarian chains, the defendants made a poor showing for the notorious Quds Force of the elite Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

**[The Collapse of Iran's Rial:](#)** **Steven Plaut, *Gatestone Institute*, Feb. 21, 2013**—The Iranian economy has been imploding, at times even nudging news of Iran's nuclear program off of the front pages. In the first ten months of 2012, the Iranian currency, the rial, lost more than 80% of its exchange value. In a single day, on October 1, 2012, it dropped by 15%, and, after a brief reprieve, resumed its trend downwards in early 2013. At least one commentator has compared Iran's economic meltdown with that in Zimbabwe.

**[North Korea Shows Dangers of Half-Deal with Iran:](#)** **Gary Milhollin, *Bloomberg*, Feb 24, 2013**—Negotiators from the world's major powers sit down with Iran this week for more talks on its nuclear program, just weeks after North Korea tested another nuclear weapon. If the connection between these two events isn't obvious, it should be: North Korea's nuclear saga is a cautionary tale for anyone attempting to bargain with the Islamic Republic.

**[Iran's Shrewd Move:](#)** **Michael Makovsky and Blaise Misztal: *Weekly Standard*, Feb 22, 2013**—With the next round of international talks on Iran's nuclear program scheduled for February 26, the United States needs to understand Iran's negotiating strategy. Recent Iranian tactics suggest a seemingly contradictory approach: simultaneously slowing down and speeding up their nuclear program. But by buying time now, Iran is shrewdly seeking to evade international pressure while hastening its advance to nuclear weapons capability.

**[Are Iran Sanctions Working?:](#)** **Elliott Abrams, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Feb. 21, 2013**—It's a commonplace to say that sanctions against Iran are tighter than ever and are working. Here's an example from White House spokesman Jay Carney last

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Fall: "We have diplomatic isolation and international isolation that's unprecedented in history and it's having a profound impact on both the Iranian economy and the Iranian regime's internal political structure."



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