



Negotiating with Iran is better than war

By Gene Healy

December 2, 2013

An technician works at the Uranium Conversion Facility just outside the city of Isfahan, 255...

For some neoconservative pundits and GOP hardliners, it's always 1938.

The provisional agreement with Iran concluded last week — freezing uranium enrichment above 5 percent, committing the Islamic state to neutralizing its stockpile of 20 percent uranium, and allowing weapons inspectors ready access to suspect sites (in exchange for unfreezing some \$6 billion in Iranian assets)—is merely the latest to provoke cries of “Munich!” and “appeasement!”

But there aren't a lot of great choices when it comes to preventing a nuclear-armed Iran. The Washington Post's Max Fisher runs through [the unappealing menu](#) of “four bad options”: Bomb Iran, invade it, take covert action to topple the regime, or continue the status quo in the hopes that Iran will finally cry “uncle.” There's “one okay option”: Try to negotiate a deal. These choices essentially reduce to two: war or diplomacy.

Even Winston Churchill, Munich's fiercest critic and nobody's dove, recognized in 1954 that sometimes “jaw-jaw” -- even with the Soviets -- was “better than war-war.” So too here.

Of course, the [repugnant nature](#) of the Iranian regime suggests a stronger version of Reagan's maxim for negotiating with the USSR: Don't trust -- verify.

The interim agreement provides [means for doing just that](#). It allows weapons inspectors daily access to Iran's key nuclear sites and monitoring of centrifuge production facilities and uranium mines. It's hard to see how that enhanced scrutiny increases the chance of a nuclear “breakout” for the six-month period it will be in effect.

We could, of course, continue as before, hoping they'll just give up. But the preemptive “cessation of nuclear enrichment by Iran,” even for civilian purposes, was always a nonstarter. Besides, as [Jeffrey Lewis observes](#) in Foreign Policy, there's no guarantee that the international will for restrictions will continue: “Sanctions have always been a wasting asset. It makes sense to get something for them now.”

It's very much worth trying to prevent Iran from going nuclear, but not because of the fanciful scenarios some hawks advance, like a suicidal first strike on Israel or “a nuclear suitcase” in New York.

Nuclear deterrence has an impressive track record: It's worked even for demonstrably genocidal dictators like the nuclear-armed Mao and Stalin, and for extremist Islamist regimes like Pakistan. There's a reason Iran has never given chemical weapons to its terrorist clients Hamas or Hezbollah—the threat of massive retaliation by Israel, which has some 80 nuclear warheads deliverable by F-16s, ballistic missiles and submarines. The same logic of deterrence would apply to a nuclear Iran.

Like it or not, there is no plausible military option that could stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons if it's hell-bent on doing so. (For whatever it's worth, the U.S. intelligence community consensus is that the regime has [not yet made that decision](#).)

We're not going to invade and occupy a country with more than twice the population of Iraq; and airstrikes would only delay a nuclear breakout, while empowering hardliners who want the bomb. “You can't destroy knowledge and you can't destroy the basic technology,” says [defense analyst Jeffrey White](#). Air raids would set a weapons program back “maybe two years, maybe three years.” At what cost? Likely a wider war in the Middle East with Iranian attempts to close the Straits of Hormuz and terrorist strikes on the U.S. homefront.

Trying to broker a deal with a reprehensible regime isn't ideal. But, as CIA operative Tony Mendez described his unlikely hostage-rescue plan in last year's Oscar-winner "Argo": “There are only bad options. It's about finding the best one.”

War is the worst bad idea we've got--by far. Thankfully, it just became a little less likely.