

Learning from North Korea

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An Israeli protester in Tel Aviv this week opposing the prospect of military action against Iran. URIEL SINAI/Getty Images

At the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul this week, two states were notably absent: Iran and North Korea. As international pariahs under heavy sanctions, the two countries have much in common but one important difference: North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, while Iran does not.

Washington must learn from its errors in handling North Korea to keep Iran from following the same course. It must engage Tehran to bring it back from the brink and into the international community.

Since 9/11, the United States has attacked Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya. Now the war drums are being beaten for an attack on Iran. But the impact of such a war would be unpredictable, and the result would be chaotic, if not catastrophic.

The threat of attack gives Tehran reason to forge ahead with its nuclear program. As in North Korea, Iran's regime is focused on survival. That interest would be advanced by recognition as a nuclear power.

By all accounts, Iran is suffering from the latest sanctions, which target oil transactions that provide 50 to 70 percent of government revenue. The Iranian rial has lost half its value since December - the same month when an unemployed worker threw a shoe at President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose party took a beating in parliamentary elections. Inflation is at 25 percent, unemployment at 15 percent, and some economists say the full force of sanctions might not be felt until July.

History suggests, however, that sanctions will fail. They have a poor record of persuading authoritarian regimes to sacrifice interests they see as vital. If the regime believes it needs a nuclear program or weapons to survive, it will continue to allow its people to suffer.

The result could be depressingly similar to the one in North Korea: Amid episodic negotiations with Washington, a nuclear regime of political and military elites rules indefinitely over a people suffering under international sanctions.

North Korea recently agreed to suspend uranium enrichment, nuclear tests, and missile launches, and to readmit international inspectors. In return, America will provide 240,000 metric tons of food aid. But there's no reason to expect a permanent resolution. The accord follows a pattern of U.S. aid to North Korea in the 1990s: threats, then sanctions, followed by short-lived aid deals. And it's already been thrown into disarray by the North's provocative announcement that it will launch a satellite in April.

That is also when Turkey will host talks between Iran and the "5+1 group:" the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany. Past discussions have focused on access to Iran's Parchin military base. The more important goal, however, should be more frequent negotiations. The last round of 5+1 talks was more than a year ago.

Talks will take time and patience. But there is no other peaceful way to resolve the controversy. Indeed, engagement is essential to the spirit of nonproliferation. Outside observers have to have access to nuclear facilities to prevent diversion of civilian materials to military purposes.

As it seeks more intrusive inspections, America should dampen its rhetoric and expand engagement efforts. That includes scaling back sanctions given progress. The long-term goal should be to incorporate Iran into the community of nations.

Of course, we should hope for a democratic transformation in Iran, but that is more likely if its recalcitrant leadership gradually accepts international norms. That could also help reduce regime unpredictability, reassuring those concerned about an Iranian bomb.

While not popular with those who see war as the answer to most international problems, diplomacy remains the best means to contain Tehran's nuclear ambitions. A military strike would risk another uncontrollable war in the Middle East, while merely delaying Iran's nuclear program. The resulting instability would ripple through Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other fragile states.

America's Nobel Peace Prize-winning president should pursue serious negotiations and reward Tehran for any change of course. Virtually no one wants Iran to develop nuclear weapons. But war would almost certainly leave America worse off, and sanctions could well fail while punishing the Iranian people for no good reason.

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