



Lucy and the Nuclear Football

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If you grew up any time in the last half-century, chances are you have fond memories of Charles Schulz's iconic "Peanuts" comic strip and its hard-luck protagonist, Charlie Brown. Each week brought a new misfortune for the unhappy Charlie, but never more so than when his crafty friend Lucy offered to play football — a game that, no matter how many times it was attempted, invariably ended with Charlie flat on his back.

These days, that little vignette is a particularly apt analogy for the Obama administration's Iran policy. Time and again, the Iranian regime has succeeded in frustrating the White House's earnest attempts at diplomatic "engagement." So it was last week, when — on the heels of a very public diplomatic charm offensive aimed at the West — Iran's new, ostensibly moderate president, Hassan Rouhani, struck a familiar tone during his visit to the U.N. General Assembly meeting in New York.

Ahead of Rouhani's visit, hopes in Washington had run high for some sort of meeting between him and President Obama. But Rouhani's entourage snubbed an offer from the White House for just such a symbolic "encounter," deeming the logistics to be "too complicated." And when Rouhani took to the podium at Turtle Bay last Tuesday, his address contained the same tired litanies about Western imperialism and injustice that have become de rigueur excuses for the Iranian regime's anti-Americanism and nuclear drive.

By objective standards, Rouhani's behavior was puzzling. But by Iranian ones, it makes perfect sense.

First, Rouhani's not in charge. Despite the softer diplomatic line being touted by Iran's new president, real decision-making authority within the Islamic Republic lies with the country's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. So does ultimate control over the country's nuclear program, which is now the main bone of contention between Tehran and the West. True, Khamenei himself has shown some promising hints of moderation of late; in a speech ahead of Rouhani's visit to the U.S., for example, he talked about the need for "historic leniency" in dealing with the West, a turn of phrase many interpreted as authorization for political flexibility.

But it's far from clear that Khamenei, the final arbiter of Iran's strategic direction, is willing to make meaningful concessions — even if Rouhani himself is. Indeed, the president's U.N. address looked for all the world like he had been reminded belatedly by the powers that be in Tehran of the proper political line that should be taken toward the West.

Second, Rouhani's objectives are overwhelmingly tactical. Widening Western sanctions are having a real and significant effect on the Iranian economy, from soaring inflation to rising commodity prices. That's a real challenge to the legitimacy of Iran's president, who campaigned successfully this summer on a platform of economic renewal. His overtures, then, smack more than a little bit of personal face-saving and domestic politicking.

They also run counter to the plans of others in the Iranian regime. Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards, for example, have signaled in no uncertain terms that Rouhani has an exceedingly short leash for his diplomatic overtures, and that any deal with the U.S. won't entail a "retreat from fundamental rights" to develop a nuclear capability. That suggests that whatever bargain Rouhani is actually empowered to strike with Washington is destined to be decidedly modest in scope — and won't answer fundamental concerns over the scope and intent of the Iranian regime's nuclear endeavor.

By now, of course, all of this is ancient history. Policy wonks in Washington were quick to spin Rouhani's snub as merely a temporary impediment on the inevitable road to peace with Iran, and counseled patience and humility — and redoubled diplomacy — from the White House. The Obama administration, desperate to avoid escalation with Iran, has listened; late Friday, the White House announced that President Obama had phoned Rouhani for a "historic" conversation — and signaled that the groundwork was now laid for serious diplomatic détente.

But for all those keeping score at home, last week's events should be a useful reminder that, just like Lucy with the football, Iran's regime can be expected to pull the rug out from under our feet when the opportunity arises. The only question is: Why do we, like Charlie Brown, perennially take the bait?