



Making a Bad Iran Deal Worse

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We're witnessing a strange spectacle in U.S. foreign policy, one with no obvious precedent: President Barack Obama is trying desperately to protect his cherished nuclear deal with Iran, making one concession after another in response to Iran's post-deal demands to ensure that Tehran doesn't walk away from it.

Thus despite the terms to which U.S.-led global negotiators and Iran supposedly agreed in July, the deal is less a firm agreement than a continuing drama with one storyline: Tehran demands a concession, the administration proposes a response, Iran-watchers in Congress and elsewhere voice concerns and U.S. officials offer a middle ground to satisfy Tehran without igniting a revolt in Washington.

But the concessions - the most recent of which involve Iran's ballistic missiles program and its access to the U.S. financial system - are not just rewriting the previous consensus among government officials, diplomats, nuclear experts and Iran-watchers in the United States, Europe and the Middle East over how the deal would work. They're also serving to expand Iran's military capability, strengthen its economy and leave U.S. allies in the region feeling more abandoned.

Washington's post-deal maneuvering should not surprise us, for it mirrors the pre-deal negotiations during which the administration discarded several of its pledges to Congress and the public on key fronts - e.g., to secure "anywhere, anytime" inspections of suspected Iranian military-related nuclear sites, to include Iran's ballistic missiles program in a final agreement and to prevent it from ever achieving nuclear weaponry.

As the president and his team discarded these and other pledges during the many months of negotiations, they essentially mocked Obama's promise to walk away from a "bad deal." Now, in their post-deal maneuvering, they're doing whatever they can to ensure that Iran doesn't walk away.

On ballistic missiles - which are important because Iran is testing increasingly powerful and sophisticated missiles on which to mount nuclear warheads - U.S. officials first termed Iran's test-firing of missiles in March a violation of the United Nations Security Council resolution that accompanied the nuclear deal. Officials then seemed to accept Russia's interpretation that while the resolution calls on Tehran not to test missiles, it doesn't actually prohibit the regime from doing so.

Secretary of State John Kerry conceded even more ground late last week by further separating the nuclear deal from Iran's missile program. He proposed new U.S. negotiations with Tehran over that program, with hopes of fashioning a "new arrangement to find a peaceful solution" - as long as Iran would first "make it clear to everybody that they are prepared to cease these kinds of activities that raise questions about credibility and questions about intentions."

That Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif dismissed Kerry's proposal, echoing Tehran's line that its missile program is "non-negotiable," is hardly surprising. By accepting the specific language in the U.N. resolution to which Iran and Russia now point, the United States had previously sacrificed any ammunition that it might have used to try to secure new U.N. sanctions against Iran over its missile tests.

As for the U.S. financial system, Washington is edging towards lifting restrictions on Iran's access to the dollar in response to Iranian concerns that despite the sanctions relief that the nuclear deal provides, Western banks remain reluctant to do business with Iran. By letting the Islamic Republic do business in dollars, Washington would be signaling Western banks, which have long faced fines for doing business with Iran, that they should no longer worry about such things.

Unfortunately, such a U.S. move would significantly broaden the benefits that Iran was expected to enjoy under the nuclear deal, providing relief from sanctions that were put in place not due to Iran's nuclear program but, instead, to its terror-financing, money laundering, and other unsavory behavior. Washington would be providing such relief even in the absence of any change in Tehran's behavior on those fronts.

The administration's inclination to pursue this path has raised hackles in both parties, with the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Republican Chairman Ed Royce and the Democratic House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer among the many lawmakers who have reminded the administration of its repeated pledges to the contrary.

That the administration is making post-deal concessions is bad enough. That it's doing so as Iran continues to prop up Syria's brutal strongman, President Bashar Assad, as it continues to send arms to the Houthi rebels in Yemen and as it just announced that it will beef up the power of its warheads, is even more galling.

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