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Sanctions on Iran Won't Be Cranked Back Up

Arms control in action: The bad guys cheat, and democracies do nothing.

By

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President Obama wants Iran to suspend parts of its nuclear program in return for easing international economic sanctions. Critics contend that if the West strikes a deal along these lines, Iran could cheat far more easily than the rest of the world could reinstate tough sanctions. But Mr. Obama insists that relaxing sanctions is reversible: If the Iranians are "not following through," he recently told NBC News, "We can crank that dial back up."

Peace and arms-control agreements have a long history that warns against such assurances. Democratic countries have time and again failed to get what they bargained for with their undemocratic antagonists—and then found themselves unable or unwilling to enforce the bargain.

After World War I, the Versailles and Locarno Treaties subjected Germany to arms-control measures, including demilitarization of the Rhineland. When Germany's Nazi regime boldly remilitarized the Rhineland in 1936, neither Britain, France nor any other treaty party took enforcement action.

This and other 20th-century incidents led U.S. strategist Fred Iklé to write a prescient 1961 "Foreign Affairs" article titled "After Detection—What?" He argued: "In entering into an arms-control agreement, we must know not only that we are technically capable of detecting a violation but also that we or the rest of the world will be politically, legally and militarily in a position to react effectively if a violation is discovered." Iklé foresaw that the Soviets would violate their agreements, and that U.S. presidents would find it difficult or impossible to remedy the violations.

Nevertheless, the U.S. made a series of arms-control treaties with the Soviets. When the predicted violations occurred, no enforcement actions were even attempted.

During the Reagan administration, U.S. officials detected a huge radar in the Soviet city of Krasnoyarsk that violated the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Despite his reputation as an arms-control skeptic and anti-Soviet hard-liner, Reagan concluded he had no good options other than to complain. The U.S. continued to adhere to the treaty for another 16 years, until President George W. Bush withdrew for reasons unrelated to violations.

Another democracy that has failed to enforce agreements is Israel. When Israel signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993, then-Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was asked what Israel would do if the agreement were violated. He declared it was "reversible," assuring skeptics that if the PLO broke its peace pledges, Israel would not only stop territorial withdrawals, but retake the land already traded.

The PLO promptly violated Oslo in various ways, most egregiously by launching the Second Intifada in 2000. But no Israeli government—on the left or right—ever terminated the Accords, let alone reversed any withdrawals.

What typically happens with such agreements is the following: On the democratic side, political leaders hype the agreement to their voters as a proud diplomatic achievement. The nondemocratic side—typically an aggressive, dishonest party—cheats.

The democratic leaders have no desire to detect the violation because they don't want to admit that they oversold the agreement or, for other reasons, they don't want to disrupt relations with the other side. If they can't ignore the violation, they will claim the evidence is inconclusive. But if it is conclusive, they will belittle the significance of the offense. Officials on the democratic side sometimes even act as de facto defense attorneys for the cheaters.

Recall the Krasnoyarsk case. Some U.S. officials in internal administration meetings in which I participated said we should not accuse the Soviets of violating the ABM Treaty simply because they built the football-field-size radar. Rather, they disgracefully but brazenly argued, we should wait until the Soviets turned it on.

When PLO officials in the 1990s breached Oslo by inciting anti-Israel hatred and supporting terrorism, the Israelis who had made the deal offered similarly disgraceful excuses along the lines of: "We don't care what they say, only what they do," and "You have to make peace with your enemies, not with your friends."

An agreement that actually dismantled the Iranian nuclear program would be a formidable accomplishment. But if Mr. Obama can justify his deal with Iran only by

promising to "crank up" the relaxed sanctions if and when the Iranian regime cheats, no one should buy it. History teaches that we should expect the cheating, but not effective enforcement.

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