



Say No to Tehran's Gambit

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All of a sudden, revolutionary Iran has offered direct talks with the United States. All of a sudden, the usual suspects -- European commentators, American liberals, dissident CIA analysts, Madeleine Albright -- are urging the administration to take the bait.

It is not rare to see a regime such as Iran's -- despotic, internally weak, feeling the world closing in -- attempt so transparent a ploy to relieve pressure on itself. What is rare is to see the craven alacrity with which such a ploy is taken up by others.

Mark my words. The momentum for U.S.-Iran negotiations has only begun. The focus of the entire Iranian crisis will begin to shift from the question of whether Tehran will stop its nuclear program to whether

Washington will sit down alone at the table with Tehran.

To this cynical bait-and-switch, there can be no American response other than No. Absolutely not.

Just yesterday the world was excoriating the Bush administration for its unilateralism -- on Kyoto, the ABM Treaty and, most especially, Iraq -- and demanding that Washington act in concert with the "international community." Just yesterday the Democratic nominee for president attacked President Bush's foreign policy precisely for refusing to consult with, listen to and work with "the allies."

Another day, another principle. Bush is now being pressured to abandon multilateralism and go it alone with Iran. Remember: In September 2003, after Iran was discov-

ered cheating on its nuclear program, the United States wanted immediate U.N. action. The allies argued for a softer approach. Britain, France and Germany wanted to negotiate with Tehran and offer diplomatic and economic carrots in return for Iran's giving up its nuclear weapons program. The United States acquiesced.

After 2 1/2 years of utter futility, the E.U. Three had to admit failure and acknowledge the obvious: Iran had no intention of giving up its nuclear ambitions. Iran made the point irrefutable when it broke International Atomic Energy Agency seals and brazenly resumed uranium enrichment.

The full understanding we had with our allies was that if the E.U. Three process failed, we would go to the Security Council together and get sanctions imposed on Iran. Yes, Russia and China might still stand in the way. But even so, concerted sanctions by America, Europe and other economic powers could have devastating effects on Iran and its shaky clerical dictatorship.

Which is why the mullahs launched this recent initiative. They know, and fear, that if the West persists on its present and agreed course, they face sanctions so serious that their rule, already unpopular, might be in jeopardy. The very fact that Iran is desperately trying to change the subject, change the venue and shift the burden onto the United States shows how close the mullahs believe we are to achieving major international pressure on them.

Pushing Washington to abandon the multilateral process and enter negotiations alone is more than rank hypocrisy. It is a pernicious folly. It would short-circuit the process that, after years of dithering, is about to yield its first fruits: sanctions that Tehran fears. It would undo the allied consensus, produce endless new delays and give Iran more time to reach the point of no return, after which its nuclear status would be a *fait accompli*.

Entering negotiations carries with it the responsibility to do something if they fail. The E.U. Three understood that when they took on the mullahs a couple of years ago. Bilateral U.S.-Iran talks are the perfect way to get Europe off the hook. They would preempt all the current discussions about sanctions, place all responsibility for success on the negotiations and set America up to take the blame for their inevitable failure.

It is an obvious trap. We should resolutely say no.

Except on one condition. If the allies, rather than shift responsibility for this entire process back to Washington, will reassert their responsibility by pledging support for U.S. and/or coalition military action against Iran in the event that the bilateral talks fail, then we might achieve something.

You want us to talk? Fine. We will go there, but only if you arm us with the largest stick of all: your public support for military action if the talks fail. The mullahs already fear economic sanctions; they will fear

European-backed U.S. military action infinitely more. Such negotiations might actually accomplish something.

That's our condition. Otherwise, the entire suggestion of bilateral talks is a ploy that should be rejected with the same contempt with which it was proposed.