To Obama: Close the Deal with Iran

Exclusive: The State of the Union offers President Obama a high-profile opportunity to finally close the deal with Iran over its nuclear program by accepting the need for U.S. concessions on sanctions, but there are doubts he will seize this Nixon-to-China moment, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern notes in this appeal.

By Ray McGovern

Dear Mr. President: As you put the final touches to your State of the Union Address, I urge you to avoid overstating the “threat” from Iran. Indeed, I hope you might take this august occasion to declare your willingness to lift sanctions on Iran as a final step toward a deal permanently constraining Iran’s nuclear program and to begin normalizing relations with this important country.

In recent months, Iranian leaders have signaled a readiness to reach a nuclear accord and open a broader dialogue with your administration on other pressing regional issues if only the United States would start treating Iran with some respect, rather than endlessly buffeting the country with insults, threats and punishments.

People often criticize Iranians for interminable haggling, part of their “bazaar culture,” but this looks like a moment when it is the Americans who won’t take yes for an answer. Iranian officials have repeatedly disavowed a desire to build nuclear weapons, have insisted that they are only interested in nuclear energy and have expressed a willingness to transfer much of their enriched uranium out of the country. But what they want in return is meaningful relief from economic sanctions and a repudiation from U.S. policymakers that their real goal is “regime change.”

Since the stated rationale of the sanctions was to compel Iran to accept guarantees on its nuclear program not to overthrow the country’s Islamic republic it would seem to be a no-brainer: pocket the nuclear guarantees in exchange for sanction relief.

But there is growing bafflement among some involved in these negotiations over what the hold-up is on your end. Yes, you’ve been installing a new national security team, and the likes of Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham would get angry if you concluded a peace agreement with Iran. But they’re already threatening to filibuster Chuck Hagel at Defense and John Brennan at CIA over the Benghazi incident. So what do you have to lose? If you unveiled a dramatic gesture for peace and stability in the Middle East, it might make their
obstruction look even pettier.

Plus, if you truly do want to change the arc of history, why not show that you can be as forceful as Richard Nixon when he ended years of hostility between the United States and Communist China by engaging its leaders despite his disdain for their political/economic system? Those ideological differences have not prevented the two countries from becoming important trading partners and collaborating on many mutual interests.

You could do the same for the Middle East by striking a nuclear deal with Iran and exploring other areas of possible agreement and cooperation. By delaying further on the nuclear talks, you only give troublemakers on all sides more opportunities to sabotage an agreement and prod the United States and Iran toward a violent confrontation.

**Dubious Anniversary**

This State of the Union also represents a dubious anniversary of sorts, coming a decade after George W. Bush’s address in which he framed his mendacious case for invading Iraq, including his infamous “16 words” based on forged documents: “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.”

You, Mr. President, could put a capstone to that era of unnecessary hostilities in the Middle East by announcing a new framework for peace.

I should note here that a decade ago I issued a public plea to President Bush to change direction from his course toward war. I urged him to “beware the consequences of favoring ideologues and spin-doctors over the professional intelligence officers paid to serve you.” Obviously, my appeal was unsuccessful. The die was already cast. His mind was set on war and the “intel” that he would cite had been carefully crafted to serve that purpose.

It is important that you take this opportunity to travel down a different path, respecting the intelligence professionals who have concluded for half a decade that Iran has over the past decade NOT been building a nuclear bomb.

What you might find a bit disquieting is this: it appears you have a choice between two mutually contradictory tacks to take on Iran. John Brennan, your nominee for CIA director, in his prepared remarks to the Senate Intelligence Committee on Feb. 7, claimed that Iran is “bent on pursuing nuclear weapons.” (emphasis added)

In making that claim, Brennan has put himself in company with evidence-deprived Bush/Cheney leftovers and lingering neoconservatives who have been largely
discredited in their warning of gloom and doom from Iran (as well as, earlier, from Iraq). (See Consortiumnews.com’s, “John Brennan’s Tenet-Like Testimony.”)

You will remember that after fraudulent intelligence was served up ten years ago to “justify” attacking Iraq, new management was put in place in 2005 to manage National Intelligence Estimates. An NIE on Iran became the first order of the day, since it was no secret that Iran was next, after Iraq, on the Bush/Cheney list to attack.

The National Intelligence Estimate completed in November 2007 concluded, unanimously and “with high confidence” that Iran had stopped working on nuclear weaponization in 2003 and had not resumed that work a judgment revalidated each year since by the Director of National Intelligence.

This has not prevented neocons and their favorite media personalities from trying to make Iran’s nuclear program seem more menacing. On Meet the Press on Feb. 3, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta was the subject of attempted mousetrapping by NBC’s Chuck Todd, who was hoping Panetta could be maneuvered into contradicting the NIE.

It was awkward for Panetta, but to his credit rather than apologize when Todd accused him of believing “the Iranians were not pursuing nuclear weapons,” Panetta held firm, under considerable goading.

Finally, after conferring with co-panelist Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Gen. Martin Dempsey, Panetta said, with some exasperation: “I no, I can’t tell you because I can’t tell you they’re in fact pursuing a weapon because that’s not what intelligence says we we’re they’re doing right now.” (emphasis added)

So you have an odd choice, Mr. President. On this crucial issue, you can go with the professional intelligence analysts who have scoured the evidence for signs that Iran had restarted the weapons part of its nuclear development program and who came up empty the position embraced by your outgoing Defense Secretary who also was your first CIA director. Or you can go with the stated view of your current nominee to lead the CIA, John Brennan, which dovetails with more alarmist warnings from the same discredited quarters that claimed Iraq had all manner of weapons of mass destruction.

Perhaps the way around this awkward situation is to advance the debate beyond this contradiction over intelligence and to declare that the United States is ready to formalize a permanent deal with Iran to prevent it from resuming work on nuclear weaponization. That would be an accomplishment worth cheering.

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