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GALLINGTON: Iran's mistake

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COMMENTARY:

Aggressively pursuing its so-called "nuclear rights" with thousands of new gas centrifuges now online, Iran is concentrating on producing the weapons-grade material it needs to build nuclear bombs and warheads. While this is the "final push" in their nuclear weapons program, they have been on this track since the 1980s and have absolutely no intention of changing direction, despite their conciliatory language from time to time.

Sound familiar? The Iranian model emulates the same kind of hosing down given us by North Korea's "Little Kim." The Iranians watched the North Koreans jerk us around (first the Clinton administration and then — to the dismay of conservatives — the Bush administration) for years over their nuclear weapons program, and are copying it — at least the charade cover for it.

The charade has at least three acts: Act One: Deny, deny, deny even in the face of irrefutable evidence. Act Two: Negotiate, negotiate, negotiate and threaten at the same time. Act Three: Build, build and build while denying, threatening and negotiating, throwing in a "hopeful and conciliatory" statement now and again.

When looked at closely, of course, the "hopeful and conciliatory" statements are aimed at hoping that our side changes its position while backing away from any suggestion that a change could come from the Iranian side. In a nutshell, they hope the West will eventually acquiesce to the reality of Iran having nuclear weapons, i.e., that we'll "get over it."

The charade works. Look at the concessions the North Koreans squeezed out of the Clinton administration, all the while building nuclear weapons. And, they were on their way to do it again to the Bush administration, except they made a serious error — they

gratuitously threatened the Japanese.

That was a very big mistake, because Japan can develop a nuclear weapons capability virtually overnight — all they really have to do is decide to do it. Of course, the folks most concerned about this startling possibility were not the North Koreans, but the Chinese, who evidently — and behind the scenes — have pretty much shut down the North Korean nuke program. And this apparently has happened outside the formal talks with the North Koreans.

Now, back to Iran: The "big question" remains whether they will be allowed to develop a nuclear weapons capability. And, this is where the Iranians have made their miscalculation, because just like the Chinese in the North Korean-Japanese standoff, there are a number of countries, some in the immediate area, that will not allow Iran to "go nuclear" — by acquiescence or otherwise.

Not surprisingly, most observers assume that this pressure will come from Israel and/or the U.S., with perhaps the European Union joining in with a threat or two. There are even various attack scenarios that have been played out in the media, mostly involving U.S. and/or Israeli forces. In the meantime, Iran is strengthening its air defenses with new Russian systems. So, how will this turn out?

A war — even a "limited" one — over Iran's nuclear program could easily devastate the region economically and could even cause a fundamental realignment of power and influence in the Middle East. Now, ask yourself, who would most not want to see that happen? And, who has a "big stick" in the Middle East, with similar swag over the Iranians that the Chinese have over the North Koreans?

The Saudis.

However, before the Saudis (and possibly the United Arab Emirates) intervened in this dispute, they would have to be convinced that a war was inevitable, and that they had to act to protect their interests and preserve their primacy of economic power and influence in the region. While the Saudis and the UAE are primarily Sunni Muslims and the Iranians are primarily Shi'ite, tensions between these Islamic branches would not be a significant factor in this dynamic — it will be about very big money, power, oil and political influence.

Assuming this could well be a resolution to the "Iranian nuclear problem," how should the West proceed? The geopolitical beauty of the Saudi/UAE intervention scenario is that the West can — and should — continue to take the very hard line that they will not permit Iran to develop a nuclear weapons capability, perhaps refining that position by defining what a "nuclear weapons capability" means, especially with respect to the production of weapons-grade nuclear material.

Next — and especially if we aren't doing it already — we need to be keeping the Saudis and the UAE in a "real time loop" of appropriate intelligence and diplomatic efforts, as well as military planning. Obviously, this will have to be done very carefully, at the appropriate senior level, and by people who have special skills in such matters. This is because of the transparencies that characterize such activities in the Middle East: In other words, the working assumption should be that most everyone is having "backdoor" conversations with most everyone else.

What — and where — would be the likely new "red lines" for us with such a scenario?

We should continue to set our own red lines with regard to our own national security interests, and with the working assumption that the problem will have to be resolved without the intervention of any other party. Of course, there is some irony here: Only if the Saudis and UAE are convinced that we — and possibly others — are really serious about the use of force against the Iranians will they be motivated to intervene.

Might we have to eventually array our forces in the region and put certain strategic systems on alert — maybe even order "demonstration strikes" on some specific targets in Iran? In the final analysis, we will have to show that level of resolve in this confrontation. If we don't — or can't — the Iranians will too soon be threatening us with nuclear weapons, using the same kind of rhetoric they use to threaten their neighbors.

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