Lessons from Pyongyang

How the Obama administration can protect the Iran nuclear deal by looking to past difficulties with North Korea.

BY JOEL WIT

As a State Department official, I spent a decade negotiating and implementing a denuclearization agreement with North Korea. The 1994 Agreed Framework, a landmark denuclearization deal that collapsed in 2002, is now back in the news as critics of the new interim accord with Iran compare it to failed arrangements with Pyongyang, which they argue cheated on a succession of agreements in order to secure political and material benefits while continuing to build its nuclear capacity. For good measure, opponents note that the U.S. negotiator on the Iran deal, Wendy Sherman, was also involved in the Clinton administration's dealings with the North.

The over-the-top barrage by opponents of the Iran accord -- such as an opinion piece by the deputy editor of in the Wall Street Journal editorial page arguing that the deal is worse than Munich and the 1973 Paris Peace accords that "betrayed our Vietnamese ally" -- reminds me of attacks on the Agreed Framework in 1994, including Sen. John McCain's blasting of the deal as appeasement. Indeed, opponents have predictably dredged up the old bromides about Washington's past experience in dealing with Pyongyang as Exhibit A in their verbal assault. "Apparently America has not learned its lesson from 1994 when North Korea fooled the world," Republican Buck McKeon intoned in a statement. Another op-ed in the Wall Street Journal asserts that Iran is following North Korea's path, which "over the past two decades, has shown the world... how a rogue state can exploit over-eager western diplomacy."
Unfortunately, the Obama administration's effort to counter these attacks has been just as historically uninformed as its critics. On Sunday, Secretary of State John Kerry rejected the comparison, arguing that Iran is a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), has engaged in negotiations, is committed to daily inspections of certain facilities, and has publicly said that it will not build a nuclear weapon. His comments only fueled conservative commentators, who rightly pointed out that when the Agreed Framework was negotiated, North Korea was in fact still a member of the NPT (its announced intention to withdraw had been suspended), did engage in a negotiation, was committed to denuclearization, and did agree to allow inspections of key facilities.

It's true that there are important lessons to be learned from our past difficulties with Pyongyang, but the opposition to the Iran deal represents a fundamental misreading of history. What really happened in 1994 is that Pyongyang abandoned a multi-billion dollar program that U.S. intelligence estimated could produce enough plutonium for almost 100 nuclear weapons. By the time the framework collapsed in 2002, the North could only build five bombs and had a pilot uranium-enrichment program that was not even close to producing bomb-making material. Over a decade later, the North has still not recovered from the setback imposed by the Agreed Framework, although its arsenal is poised to grow rapidly over the next few years.

Critics also point to the material benefits North Korea received as part of the deal. Those benefits included about $500 million in heavy fuel oil shipments spread out over almost a decade, as well as concrete foundations for two reactors that were never completed and eventually abandoned. Pyongyang's discarded plutonium-production program, on the other hand, began in the 1960s, and by the time it ended three decades later, it had probably cost the North billions if not tens of billions of dollars. North Korea got the short end of the stick, not the United States.
No one is interested in seeing arrangements with Iran suffer the same fate as the 1994 agreement, which ended when the United States discovered a small secret uranium-enrichment program in violation of the deal's terms. But the real lessons of the past have nothing to do with whether diplomacy is useful. If carefully crafted, agreements with rogue states -- even with North Korea -- can serve the national interests of the United States. Indeed, the history of dealing with Pyongyang highlights a number of potential landmines that the Obama administration will encounter -- and must avoid -- as it moves down the diplomatic road.

First, the United States should avoid the "problem solved" mentality that inevitably follows landmark agreements. Once the 1994 accord was concluded, senior U.S. government officials paid a lot less attention to North Korea and a lot more to other foreign policy challenges. That is natural but, as a mid-level State Department civil servant, I was left to make sure that a denuclearization agreement including a multi-billion-dollar reactor construction project was properly implemented. Because of the lack of support from policymakers, deadlines were missed and Washington's credibility undermined, both with its allies and North Korea. Accords with Iran may not involve such large-scale undertakings, but they will still require constant vigilance by senior government officials.

Second, without a thawing of bilateral political relations, nuclear deals ultimately fail. The two go hand in hand since countries build nuclear weapons in part to respond to a perceived security threat. U.S. negotiators included provisions in the 1994 accord for improving relations between Washington and Pyongyang but, unfortunately, failed to recognize that four decades of bad blood could not be erased overnight. Continuing periodic tensions between the United States and the North, as well as between Pyongyang and South Korea, our close ally, on issues unrelated to the nuclear agreement, undermined
implementation. The same danger exists with Iran given its history of bad relations with Washington and Israel, as well as a raft of differences on other issues, such as support for terrorist groups.

Third, plan for disputes and cheating. The Bush administration's response to North Korean cheating in 2002 -- dispatching a senior official to Pyongyang to demand the North come clean or else -- was hasty and not well thought out. When the North withdrew from the agreement and restarted its nuclear program, the administration had no alternative but to seek new nuclear negotiations. The lessons here for the Iran accords are clear. First, build in mechanisms for dispute resolution, through both existing diplomatic channels and a compliance commission created specifically for that purpose. Second, formulate a plan of political, economic, and even military steps that can be taken if problem-solving fails.

Finally, domestic political buy-in is essential to ensure that agreements last. Faced with Republican opposition, the Clinton administration tried to finesse the problem by proposing severe constraints on its own funding for implementation. Directly confronting Republicans might have risked scuttling the agreement, but this indirect approach left festering resentments that eventually created serious problems for following through on its commitments. The Obama administration may face a similar dilemma on Iran, although Congress's active role in imposing sanctions will probably make it impossible to finesse the issue. (While the limited tranche of sanctions lifted in the interim deal can be accomplished by the White House alone, lifting the more extensive remaining web of sanctions as part of a final deal will likely require congressional involvement, if only because of political considerations.)
Understanding the real lessons of past agreements with North Korea, and not buying into the historical fiction purveyed by opponents, will only strengthen the Obama administration's effort to resolve the Iranian nuclear challenge. As the saying goes, "those who can't remember history are condemned to repeat it." Conservative critics would do well to get their facts straight.

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**Boxed In**

How Israel became the land of no good options.

**By Amos Harel**

TEL AVIV, Israel — Jerusalem's response to the Iranian nuclear agreement has been immediate -- and scathing. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blasted it as a "bad deal," Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon described it as a "historical mistake," while another minister, Uzi Landau, compared it to the 1938 Munich Agreement, in which the West tried to appease Adolf Hitler.

It's not hard to see why Israel's top officials are so upset. Contrary to some American claims, the deal does not significantly roll back Iran's nuclear capabilities, and in the event that it collapses, it will only take the Iranians a few months, at most, to produce enough enriched uranium to construct their first nuclear bomb. The agreement also does not grapple with other important aspects of the Iranian nuclear project, such as the "Weapons Group," or create any international supervision over Tehran's ballistic missile program.

While Netanyahu wants to roll back Iran's ability to produce a bomb, he suspects President Barack Obama would be satisfied so long as Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon.
But despite these misgivings, it is becoming clear that Israel is slowly, grudgingly beginning to understand that the deal signed on Sunday is now the only game in town. Netanyahu's favorite mantra -- that "all options are on the table" to deal with Iran's nuclear program" -- sounds irrelevant, almost forced. At this stage, a unilateral Israeli strike is a bluff nobody believes, least of all the Israeli people themselves.

Only the collapse of the deal, along with an international consensus that Iran was at fault, could raise the possibility of an Israeli strike again. The agreement, after all, calls for daily visits to the Iranian nuclear sites by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors -- one can't imagine that Netanyahu would ever do anything so reckless as to endanger their lives.

Israel's prime minister should not be surprised by the bind he finds himself in, however. As far back as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's election in June, the prime minister's advisors had told him what to expect. But Netanyahu's real moment of decision actually came much earlier, before the 2012 U.S. presidential election. When he decided not to strike Iran then, his options became much more limited.

While the prime minister seems intent on describing this deal as a defeat, he could also have spun it as a victory if he had been so inclined. It was his threats to strike Iran, after all, that persuaded Obama to increase the international pressure on Tehran through sanctions. Those sanctions, in turn, hurt the Iranian economy and persuaded the mullahs to allow Rouhani, a relative moderate, to compete in the elections and eventually win. And it was Rouhani's charm offensive that paved the way for the deal, which has at least somewhat slowed Iran's drive for a nuclear weapon.
That's not the only regional boost Israel has experienced recently. The Iran deal is a direct consequence of the Russia-brokered agreement in August to dismantle Syria's huge stockpiles of chemical weapons. And let's recall: the original target of these weapons was Israel, not Syrian rebels or civilians. Now, this threat has vanished -- and Netanyahu didn't have to lift a finger, or give up anything, for this to happen.

But Netanyahu doesn't see things this way. He believes that the Americans could -- and should -- have driven Iran's leaders to their knees at Geneva through the application of even further sanctions. Not all Israeli military leaders agree: It is interesting to note that two recently retired chiefs of Israel's military intelligence, Gen. Amos Yadlin and Gen. Aharon Ze'evi-Farkash, refused to participate in the government's public campaign against the agreement. "Listening to the ministers' cries of agony, I almost thought that the Americans had permitted Iran to produce a nuclear warhead," Yadlin noted sarcastically.

It's not hard to see why these military leaders are loathe to criticize the agreement: It seems the Obama administration has already slowed down some of the important cooperation with Israel on crucial security issues. The current chiefs of Israel's security agencies are acutely aware of the country's dependence on American backing, and it is safe to assume that most of them share their predecessors' fears.

Nor does Israel have a viable alternative to its alliance with Washington. Netanyahu recently visited Moscow and publicly flirted with the idea of improving Jerusalem's ties with Russia, but this was an empty threat against Obama. After all, Russian President Vladimir Putin is the man who keeps providing the Syrian regime -- and through the Syrians, Hezbollah -- with modern weapons systems. The Americans, meanwhile, are still helping to finance Israel's ultra-sophisticated rocket interception systems. The newest
such system, David's Sling, was just successfully tested last week, even as tensions were nearing their peak between Washington and Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the Israeli Air Force and U.S. Air Force are conducting their largest ever joint exercises over the skies of Israel.

The deal in Geneva also means Netanyahu must tend to his political agenda at home. For years, the prime minister has built up his image as the leader who Israelis can trust to safeguard their interests against growing dangers in the region. But the Israeli public was never as keen as Netanyahu about the use of military force to prevent Iran from going nuclear, and the popular response to the Geneva agreement has accordingly remained limited. It is hard to imagine the voters criticizing Netanyahu for not striking Iran or even for not achieving a better deal -- but in the long run, Netanyahu desperately needs a new issue around which he can rally his supporters.

No one doubts Netanyahu's deep commitment to stopping the Iranian nuclear threat. Like the Blues Brothers, he is on a mission from God against the bomb. Israeli journalists are fond of saying that the prime minister -- a history buff with a softness for World War II memoires -- wakes up every morning and stares in the mirror, only to see Winston Churchill looking back at him. But these days, with the Geneva agreement a done deal, Netanyahu should look in the mirror and ask himself: What next?

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