John Bolton: The Consequences of a Bad Deal

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President Barack Obama has made an art form of attacking his opponents rather than substantively defending his own policies, most recently regarding the Vienna agreement on Iran's nuclear program. Essentially, Obama argues that we must either accept his wretched deal or go to war to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

As is typical, Obama posits the wrong choice, apparently to distract from the unpleasant reality that the agreement won't work. It will not prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. So the real choice we are faced with is dealing with the consequences of military action or the consequences of a nuclear Iran. Neither is palatable, but the latter is far worse. If the real objective is stopping Iran from getting nuclear weapons, pre-emptive military action is now inescapable.

This rock-and-hard-place outcome has long been foreseeable. Iran's dogged determination to become a nuclear-weapons state was fiercer and stronger than the West's frail response. Assuming Iran scrupulously complies with every provision agreed to in Vienna — an absurdly unlikely scenario given the ayatollahs' objectives and history — its ambitions for nuclear weapons will simply have been delayed eight to 10 years.

In all likelihood, the ayatollahs are already at work violating the accords. After all, Iran has systematically breached its voluntarily assumed obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty for more than 30 years. Now the president's deal will allow Iran to keep the fruits of its violations. Yes, the deal includes restrictions on uranium enrichment, but Tehran can retain its enrichment program, with guaranteed international assistance in improving it. These concessions are fatal mistakes.

Moreover, Iran's ballistic missile efforts — its development of the means to deliver nuclear weapons all over the world — will barely be touched. Nor does the deal in any way address Iran's clandestine weaponization efforts, which it has denied and hidden from the International Atomic Energy Agency with great skill.

And news that a secret agreement between the IAEA and Iran that will allow Tehran to use its own inspectors at a site that has been suspected of nuclear weapons development only raises further doubts.

Some critics of Obama's plan advocate scuttling the deal and increasing economic sanctions against Iran instead. They are dreaming. Iran and the United States' negotiating partners have already signed the accords and are straining at their leashes to implement them. There will be no other "better deal." Arguments about what Obama squandered or surrendered along the way are therefore fruitless. As for sanctions, they were already too weak to prevent Iran's progress toward the bomb, and they will not be reset now.

Patrick Clawson, director for research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, provided the most recent thumbs-down assessment of sanctions: "Iran has muddled through the shock of the sanctions imposed in 2012, and its structural (economic) problems are not particularly severe compared to those of other countries." He estimates Iran's nuclear and terrorism-support programs to cost only about $10 billion annually. No wonder administration officials have testified that sanctions (including those imposed piecemeal before 2012) did not slow Iran's nuclear efforts.

Nor will the deal's "snapback" mechanism (intended to coerce Iran back into compliance if it breaches its obligations) change that reality. Tehran's belligerent response is expressly stated in the agreement's text: "If sanctions are reinstated in whole or in part, Iran will treat that as grounds to cease performing its commitments … in whole or in part." Tehran does risk losing some future economic benefits should sanctions snap back, but by then it will have already cashed in the assets the deal unfreezes and signed new lucrative trade and investment contracts.

Once those benefits begin flowing all around, the pressure on world governments will only increase to ignore Iranian violations, or to treat them as minor or inadvertent, certainly not warranting the reimposition of major sanctions. The ayatollahs have dusted off Lenin's barb that "the capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them," and applied it to the age of nuclear proliferation.

If diplomacy and sanctions have failed to stop Iran, diplomacy alone will fail worse. Like it or not, we now face this unpleasant reality: Iran probably will violate the deal; it may not be detected doing so and if detected, it will not be deterred by "snapback" sanctions. So we return to the hard question: Are we prepared to do what will be necessary to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons?

Obama most certainly is not, which means the spotlight today is on Israel.

If Israel strikes, there will be no general Middle East war, despite fears to the contrary. We know this because no general war broke out when Israel attacked Saddam Hussein's Osirak reactor in 1981, or when it attacked the North Korean-built Syrian reactor in 2007. Neither Saudi Arabia nor other oil-producing monarchies wanted those regimes to have nuclear weapons, and they certainly do not want Iran to have them today.

However, Iran may well retaliate. At that point, Washington must be ready to immediately resupply Israel for losses incurred by its armed forces in the initial attack, so that Israel will still be able to effectively counter Tehran's proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah, which will be its vehicles for retaliation. The United States must also provide muscular political support, explaining that Israel legitimately exercised its inherent right of self-defense. Whatever Obama's view, public and congressional support for Israel will be overwhelming.

American weakness has brought us to this difficult moment. While we obsessed about its economic discomfort, Iran wore its duress with pride. It was never an even match. We now have to rely on a tiny ally to do the job for us. But unless we are ready to accept a nuclear Iran (and, in relatively short order, several other nuclear Middle Eastern states), get ready. The easy ways out disappeared long ago.