

Correspondence

Nuclear Negotiations with Iran

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To the Editors (Paul R. Pillar writes):

James Sebenius and Michael Singh are to be commended for advocating rigor in the analysis of international negotiations such as the one involving Iran's nuclear program.¹ Although they describe their offering as a neutral framework for analyzing any negotiation, they are not at all neutral regarding the negotiations with Iran; and they present conclusions that derive directly from specific substantive assumptions, especially about Iranian objectives. The authors repeatedly describe their assumptions as "mainstream," implying that they are uncontroversial and that any differing ones are too extreme to be worth considering. For an assumption to reside within the mainstream of popular and political discourse about Iran, however, does not make it correct. Sebenius and Singh do something similar with assumptions about U.S. interests, while sliding silently between the descriptive and the prescriptive in a way that fails to contrast actual policies with possible ones that would be consistent with those interests. Many readers' principal takeaway from their article will be that a zone of possible agreement probably did not exist as of the time of their writing and probably will not exist unless the United States takes steps toward going to war with Iran. That answer, however, given the questionable assumptions on which it is based, is very likely wrong.

IRANIAN OBJECTIVES

Sebenius and Singh's most important mistake is to assume that what Iran wants more than anything else is a nuclear weapon. More specifically, the authors contend that the Iranians most want a "large nuclear arsenal," which is what they label as the most pro-Iranian outcome on the frontier of possible outcomes in all of their diagrams. There is no basis for assuming that this accurately represents the preferences of the Iranian regime.

Tehran evidently has had an interest in nuclear weapons, as reflected in reportedly even doing some work in the past on the design of such weapons. Such interest, however, does not equate with the utility function that Sebenius and Singh ascribe to the Iranians. The authors cite the U.S. intelligence community's judgment that Iran is keep-

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1. James K. Sebenius and Michael K. Singh, "Is a Nuclear Deal with Iran Possible? An Analytical Framework for the Iran Nuclear Negotiations," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 52–91. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

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ing open the option of developing nuclear weapons (p. 59), but this is not equivalent to wanting an arsenal of weapons. Nor is even pursuing a “nuclear weapons capability”—a slippery term that could be interpreted to apply to almost any nuclear activity, including what Iran has already undertaken. Sebenius and Singh fail to mention that, in the same assessment, the intelligence community said it does not know if Iran will ever decide to build nuclear weapons.² Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has testified that the community believes Iran has not to date made any such decision.³

Sebenius and Singh do not mention other data points relevant to Iranian preferences and intentions—other than Iran’s repeated declarations that its nuclear program is solely for peaceful purposes, which the authors do mention but swiftly brush aside. There is, for example, Iran’s conversion of a substantial proportion of the uranium it has enriched to the 20 percent level into fuel plates for a nuclear reactor.⁴ This conversion diverts from the enrichment process a major portion of what could otherwise be used as feedstock for further enrichment to weapons-grade fissile material and may also have been intended to signal Iran’s desire to reach a negotiated agreement acceptable to the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany (P5+1).⁵

Another indicator is the public declaration by Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that nuclear weapons are a “sin.”⁶ Of course, one should not accept such a declaration at face value, but neither is it irrelevant to the Iranian leadership’s actual intentions regarding nuclear weapons. To the extent the supreme leader’s expressions on the subject are not empty religious flourishes and instead involve political calculation, a plausible interpretation is that he is preparing the ground for selling to the Iranian public as well as to elements in the regime an agreement with the West that would permit a continued Iranian nuclear program but would preclude development of a nuclear weapon. Such a posture is consistent with views of the Iranian public, which strongly supports continuation of a peaceful nuclear program but would appear to offer much less backing for development of a nuclear weapon.⁷

Sebenius and Singh fail to make this distinction in their article. They instead refer simply to Iran’s “nuclear program,” as they do in mentioning the value Iran evidently places on the program given the “enormous sacrifices” it has made to sustain it (p. 90). Use of the undifferentiated term “nuclear program” disguises the unsupported leap that Sebenius and Singh make to get from the Iranian effort expended to date on an

2. “Unclassified Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” January 31, 2012, p. 5, <http://intelligence.senate.gov/120131/clapper.pdf>.

3. James Risen and Mark Mazzetti, “U.S. Spies See No Iran Moves to Build Bomb,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2012.

4. International Atomic Energy Agency, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and Relevant Provisions of Security Council Resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” November 16, 2012, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2012/gov2012-55.pdf>.

5. David E. Sanger and James Risen, “Iran’s Slowing of Enrichment Efforts May Show It Wants a Deal, Analysts Say,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2012.

6. United Press International, “Khamenei: Nuclear Weapons Are a ‘Sin,’” http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2012/08/30/Khamenei-Nuclear-weapons-are-a-sin/UPI-97861346346153/.

7. Michael Herzog, “Iranian Public Opinion on the Nuclear Program: A Potential Asset for the International Community” (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2006), pp. 3–4.

avowedly peaceful program to the value they contend Tehran places on having nuclear weapons. The erasing of any such distinction is a fundamental problem with their framework, with a utility function that portrays different types of nuclear programs as part of one, and only one, possible progression, the end point of which is a large arsenal of nuclear weapons. That function would not accurately characterize many other nuclear programs, and the authors have failed to demonstrate that it characterizes Iran's.

Another deficiency of Sebenius and Singh's framework is its static nature and failure to reflect how the value of possible outcomes to the two parties and especially to Iran is likely to vary greatly depending on other circumstances. This is what the U.S. intelligence community was referring to when it assessed that Iran's nuclear decisionmaking follows a cost-benefit approach that takes into account "the international political and security environment" and other factors.⁸ The temperature of the relationship with the United States is among the most important elements in that environment, and the outcome of the nuclear negotiations will in turn go a long way to determine the relationship's temperature. Sebenius and Singh are undoubtedly correct in identifying deterrence of external threats against Iran and the Iranian regime as the leading reason for Iranian interest in a possible nuclear weapon (p. 60). The United States is the most potent of those external threats, and the more that animosity with the United States appears to be headed toward armed conflict, the greater will be the Iranian incentive to acquire such a deterrent. Conversely, reaching an agreement with the United States and its P5+1 partners would be one of the biggest possible steps in lowering the tension and perceived level of threat. Such an agreement would significantly diminish the main reason Iran has for being interested in a nuclear weapon in the first place.

A further deficiency of the framework, or at least of how Sebenius and Singh apply it to bargaining between the United States and Iran, is that it centers narrowly on the Iranian nuclear program even though there are other significant issues that divide the two countries and are part of the bargaining relationship between them. The authors' depiction of the bargaining space reflects the U.S. preoccupation with the nuclear issue, but any corresponding diagrams that Iranian analysts might construct would look much different and would give comparable status to the issue of frozen assets and other matters of concern to Iran. For an analytic framework to work, it should reflect the motivations and objectives of both parties. Reducing every issue but one to mere side payments or side penalties does not do this.

Given the serious damage (some of which Sebenius and Singh mention in their article) that ever-increasing sanctions have inflicted on the Iranian economy, relief from sanctions is probably a major Iranian objective and a leading reason Tehran has for reaching an agreement with the United States. Incorporate sanctions relief into the analysis and the utility functions would look much different from the way Sebenius and Singh portray them. This is especially true given that a continuation of the sanctions not only has severe costs for Iran but also lesser, though still significant, costs for the United States.⁹ Sebenius and Singh dismiss the significance of sanctions for Iranian decisionmaking by mentioning the value that Khamenei places on "independence and self-sufficiency" and inferring from this that "it is unlikely that he views being cut off

8. "Unclassified Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment," p. 6.

9. The Iran Project, "Weighing Benefits and Costs of International Sanctions against Iran," December 2012, pp. 45–55, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/115678817/IranReport2-120312-2#fullscreen>.

from the U.S. politically or economically in negative terms" (p. 78). But the sanctions involve other countries besides the United States. Moreover, independence and self-sufficiency are not the same as sanctions-imposed deprivation and isolation, especially for a country that depends heavily on oil exports and has seen those exports drop sharply because of the sanctions.

Sebenius and Singh fail to acknowledge the importance to Iranians of what they usually call respect. This has to do with being accepted and dealt with as a legitimate actor in world politics rather than being treated as a pariah, and is related to the concept of *aberu* or saving face.¹⁰ Sebenius and Singh are correct in observing that "the Iranian regime likely places little value on many of the items offered by the United States," but they do not support their assertion that this includes "improved diplomatic relations" (p. 90). The respect that comes from reaching agreements with even a superpower as an equal rather than a miscreant is a significant positive side for Iran, which Sebenius and Singh's framework does not capture, of reaching a deal in the negotiations with the P5+1. Nor does their static framework capture how implementing a quest for respect is apt to vary significantly depending on how the United States approaches the negotiations. In the face of someone who treats Iran as a miscreant to be punished, respect may mean defiance and firmness. When facing someone willing to deal as an equal, it means making deals on that basis.

U.S. INTERESTS AND POSITIONS

In depicting the U.S. side in the Iran negotiations, Sebenius and Singh make little effort to disentangle bottom-line positions from political rhetoric. They take as the basic statement of the current U.S. position a speech that President Barack Obama made during the 2012 election campaign to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—a setting in which it should not be surprising to hear a hard line on the Iranian nuclear issue (pp. 62–63). It is interesting how the authors quickly accept such a statement as definitive but dismiss just as quickly the significance of what Iranian leaders say publicly about their objectives.

The most important question, however, about Sebenius and Singh's treatment of the U.S. side is: Are they referring in a narrowly descriptive way to U.S. policies as they have existed so far or to a broader array of possible U.S. positions? If it is the former, then talking about not having a zone of possible agreement is little more than a trivial restatement of the fact that an agreement has not yet been reached. But if one is to take seriously the word "possible," one needs to be talking about more than that. At a minimum, this means considering different demands and offers that could be made even without quarreling over the valuations that Sebenius and Singh ascribe to particular outcomes. A zone of possible agreement actually should mean even more than that: starting with each side's national interests and considering how possible outcomes could accommodate both side's interests, without being chained to any one set of presumed valuations of particular outcomes.

Sebenius and Singh do not appear to recognize this larger sense at all. They make no attempt to substantiate the conventional wisdom about an Iranian nuclear weapon being very bad for the United States. They say only that containing a nuclear-capable Iran

10. Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mohammad Ali Shabani, "How to Talk to Iran," *New York Times*, January 4, 2013.

would “presumably” be “significantly more difficult” than containing a nonnuclear Iran (p. 62), and that U.S. interests that an Iranian nuclear weapons capability would affect are “relatively uncontroversial” (p. 88). They mention in passing Kenneth Waltz’s sharply differing view, evidently because it is too prominent to ignore altogether, but do nothing to refute that view (p. 69).¹¹ Nor do they address how, even if one does not go as far as Waltz in suggesting that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be a net positive, the application of principles of deterrence and coercive diplomacy developed during the Cold War and the record of past nuclear proliferation do not support the conventional wisdom they have embraced.¹²

Even if one takes that conventional wisdom as a given, the U.S. negotiating position could be much different from what it has been—with major differences in the prospects for reaching an agreement—and still serve the objective of avoiding an Iranian nuclear weapon or at least making it very difficult for Iran to build one. The biggest difference would be to offer significant relief from sanctions in return for the demanded restrictions on Iranian nuclear activities. Despite a misleading reference by Sebenius and Singh to “suspension of sanctions” (p. 82), the United States and its P5+1 partners had made no proposals as of their writing that included any relief from sanctions other than spare parts for commercial aircraft.¹³ Given the importance, based on Iran’s own proposals, that Tehran places on sanctions relief, it is unsurprising that it has rejected the P5+1’s offers. Sanctions can be a significant motivator and probably are for Iran, but they yield concessions only if the sanctioned party can see that concessions will buy relief from the sanctions.

POSSIBLE AGREEMENT AND MILITARY THREATS

The broad outlines of an attainable nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 have been apparent for some time. Such an agreement would involve a cessation of Iranian enrichment of uranium to the 20 percent level, probably the shipment outside Iran of its existing 20 percent stock, and restrictions on Iranian production of low-enriched uranium in return for the other side ensuring the supply of reactor fuel and removing most sanctions.¹⁴ Without an assessment showing why such a bargain would not meet the needs of both sides, it is erroneous to conclude that there is no zone of possible agreement. In the summer of 2012, Iran reportedly made a proposal to the Europeans that included these basic elements.¹⁵ The Iranian proposal as presented was unacceptable to the P5+1 because, under it, Iran would have taken its promised steps on uranium enrichment only after the West had removed sanctions. In this respect, the Iranian pro-

11. Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (July/August 2012), pp. 2–5.

12. Paul R. Pillar, “We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran,” *Washington Monthly*, March/April 2012, pp. 13–19; and Stephen M. Walt, “The Mother of All Worst-Case Assumptions about Iran,” November 30, 2012, <http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/?page=2>.

13. Arms Control Association, “History of Official Proposals on the Iranian Nuclear Issue,” August 2012, http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposals. In talks in February 2013, the P5+1 sweetened their proposal slightly with proposed sanctions relief on precious metals and petrochemicals.

14. For one possible version of such a deal, see Reza Marashi, “Step by Step with Iran,” *National Interest*, January 4, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/step-by-step-iran-7928>.

15. David E. Sanger, “Iranians Offer Plan to End Nuclear Crisis,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2012.

posal mirrored those of the P5+1, which have called on Iran to take all of its required steps before the P5+1 would consider significant relief from sanctions. The resulting disagreement is common in international negotiations; each side naturally would prefer not to implement its own end of a deal until the other side makes good on its end. Also common is the resolution of such differences by negotiating a schedule of phased implementation in which each side both gives something and gets something in each phase. Sebenius and Singh deny that the task in the confrontation with Iran is one of “tweaking the design of the deal offered to Iran—for example, by adjusting the phases and what is offered in each” (p. 87). In fact, that is very much the task, in addition to hammering out other necessary details such as the exact disposition of the existing 20 percent enriched uranium.

Failure to recognize this need in the mistaken belief that there is no zone of possible agreement runs the danger of missing the opportunity to strike a deal that would achieve the stated U.S. objective of precluding, or at least making far less feasible, an Iranian nuclear weapon. The danger is amplified by Sebenius and Singh’s recommendation for more saber rattling, with “visible measures” to back up a threat to resort to military force (p. 89). Besides other disadvantages of doing this (such as increasing the chance of accidental war), such measures are more likely to impede negotiations than to advance them. In contrast to the authors’ assertion that the top Iranian leadership is not bothered by economically debilitating sanctions, they implicitly assume that the same leadership would be very disturbed by the prospect of a military strike—rather than seeing it as a political boost to the hard-liners who dominate the regime. The likelihood of such a boost is why Iranian opposition leaders such as Mir Hossein Mousavi have repeatedly warned against such a strike.¹⁶

Sebenius and Singh do acknowledge another difficulty: that Iran would perceive negotiations as merely a cover for a U.S. strategy of regime change. Oddly, they try to brush aside this problem by saying that the threat of military action “is not incompatible with negotiations, because it is a consequence of no deal rather than the actual U.S. objective” (p. 81). What matters for this purpose, however, is not the actual U.S. objective but the Iranian perception of it. American public discourse about Iran has already given Tehran ample reason to suspect that the objective is regime change.

One of the most recent applications of U.S. military force in the Middle East—participation in the Western intervention to overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya—probably has worsened the problem. The intervention ousted a regime that several years earlier had reached an agreement with the United States and the United Kingdom not only to give up its nuclear and other unconventional weapons programs, but to eschew international terrorism. That experience exacerbated what may be the biggest challenge in negotiating a nuclear deal with Tehran: convincing the Iranians that the United States not only wants an agreement with the Islamic Republic but would abide by it for the long term rather than, as with Libya, seizing the first good opportunity to overthrow the regime. Further saber rattling directed at Iran would exacerbate that challenge, as well as stoke whatever interest the Iranians have in acquiring nuclear weapons as a deterrent.

16. J. Berkshire Miller, “No Good Iran Military Option,” February 1, 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2012/02/01/no-good-iran-military-option/>.

CONCLUSION

Sebenius and Singh are indeed working in the mainstream of American assumptions about Iran. If rigorous analysis is to do more than merely embellish with diagrams conclusions that flow directly from assumptions drawn from conventional wisdom, rigor also must be applied to the assumptions themselves. This their article fails to do.

—Paul R. Pillar
Washington, D.C.

To the Editors (Robert Reardon writes):

James Sebenius and Michael Singh offer an analytical framework to assess zones of possible agreement (ZOPAs) in international negotiations similar to those involving Iran's nuclear activities.¹ By definition, a ZOPA must exist for negotiations to succeed. Therefore, they argue, any effort to develop negotiation tactics is futile in the absence of a ZOPA.

There are two important flaws in Sebenius and Singh's analysis. First, by seeking to separate the existence of a ZOPA from the "tactics and processes" of the negotiating process, the authors fail to consider how the bargaining process itself—indeed, the overall course of U.S.-Iranian relations—can influence the preferences of both states. Second, the authors do not define what an Iranian "nuclear weapons capability" would entail, or how it differs from either Iran's current program or the possible end states that would be acceptable to the United States and its allies. Both flaws lead the authors to be more pessimistic about the chances of a negotiated resolution to the nuclear dispute than is warranted.

U.S. AND IRANIAN PREFERENCES ARE NOT FIXED

Sebenius and Singh treat U.S. and Iranian bargaining preferences as fixed prior to the start of any negotiations: each side has a well-defined range of acceptable bargaining outcomes and red lines that remains constant throughout the negotiating process. According to the authors, Iran prefers a nuclear weapons capability over any possible deal the United States could offer, and the United States likely prefers a military conflict over a nuclear-armed Iran. Sanctions, threats, and offers of positive inducements, in their analysis, may raise or lower the costs and benefits of any given deal—or of the no-deal option—but do not fundamentally change the values the two states place on different outcomes.

In reality, neither state's preferences are fixed; they are central to determining what Washington and Tehran consider acceptable outcomes. This is more than saying that sanctions, threats, and offers of positive inducements can raise and lower the value of agreements or no-deal options. Sanctions and threats affirm the suspicions of many Iranians that the United States is intent on regime change. Economic sanctions and the threat of military force can be coercive instruments linked to limited demands, or they can be aimed at overthrowing the regime. The two objectives can be difficult to distin-

1. James K. Sebenius and Michael K. Singh, "Is a Nuclear Deal with Iran Possible? An Analytical Framework for the Iran Nuclear Negotiations," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/3), pp. 52–91. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

guish for Iranian decisionmakers, particularly when vocal and influential political actors in the United States openly promote regime change, when the United States has historically followed such a policy, and when covert operations are repeatedly used against targets within Iran.² They can thereby exacerbate security concerns and convince Iran's leaders they need nuclear weapons more than ever. Sanctions can also raise the domestic political costs of making concessions, paradoxically leading the Iranian leadership to stiffen its bargaining stance. U.S. coercive policies can discredit Iranian moderates and strengthen the legitimacy of hard-liners.³ This can create an escalatory dynamic: Iran's increased resistance to negative pressures feeds into hard-liners' narratives in Washington about Tehran's lack of interest in a deal, undermines support for engagement, and fuels calls for tighter sanctions and more credible threats.

Alternatively, offers of positive inducements can convince Iranian decisionmakers that a deal with the United States could leave them more secure. Positive inducements can also shift Iranian preferences by challenging the narrative of Iran's hard-liners of an implacably hostile United States, and improving the domestic political standing of reformers who are more open to a negotiated settlement.⁴ Like sanctions and threats, positive inducements can be self-reinforcing. "Confidence-building" deals, such as the 2009 "fuel swap" proposal under which Iran would ship its stocks of enriched uranium abroad in return for reactor fuel, can help make deeper agreements more likely by building trust.⁵ They can improve the chances that an eventual bargain to fully resolve the nuclear issue can be reached by positively shifting state preferences, both by leading decisionmakers in the two states to reevaluate their bargaining positions and by strengthening the influence of pro-engagement political factions. The result could therefore be the creation of a ZOPA that, prior to the confidence-building agreement, did not exist.

This effect is not limited to the nuclear negotiations. Coercive U.S. policies and reluctance to reciprocate Iranian diplomatic openings have, in fact, repeatedly led to a hardening of Iran's bargaining position. In the 1990s, Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani sent a number of conciliatory signals to the United States: statements indicating a

2. For a recent example of high-profile support for a policy of regime change, see Michael Ledeen, "Tehran Takedown: How to Spark an Iranian Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137803/michael-ledeen/tehran-takedown>. The United States has conducted sabotage operations against Iran's uranium enrichment program using computer malware. David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown, 2012).

3. There is a substantial literature on the paradoxical effects of coercive policies, addressing both economic sanctions and military coercion. On economic sanctions, see Johan Galtung, "On the Effects of International Economic Sanctions: With Examples from the Case of Rhodesia," *World Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (April 1967), pp. 378–416; Richard N. Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan, *Honey and Vinegar: Incentives, Sanctions, and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); and David M. Rowe, *Manipulating the Market: Understanding Economic Sanctions, Institutional Change, and the Political Unity of White Rhodesia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

4. Miroslav Nincic, "Getting What You Want: Positive Inducements in International Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 138–183. See also Etel Solingen, ed., *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

5. For analyses of the original 2009 fuel-swap proposal and its eventual failure, see Trita Parsi, *A Single Role of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012); and Mark Fitzpatrick, "Iran: The Fragile Promise of the Fuel-Swap Plan," *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (June–July 2010), pp. 67–94.

willingness to moderate Iran's position on the Israel-Palestine conflict, pressure on Hezbollah to release American hostages, and an offer of a major oil deal to the U.S. firm Conoco. The United States, however, rejected these overtures, and instead pursued further economic sanctions, excluded Iran from regional security initiatives and the Middle East peace process, and ratcheted up its rhetoric against Iran. Similarly, after an initial period of high-level dialogue and cooperation over Afghanistan in the months following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States adopted a more confrontational stance toward Iran in early 2002, and spurned the Khatami government's efforts to improve U.S.-Iranian relations. President George W. Bush listed Iran among the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union Address, and in 2003 his administration rejected an Iranian offer to discuss a "grand bargain" to settle outstanding U.S.-Iranian disputes.⁶ On each of these occasions, U.S. efforts to coerce Iran were counterproductive; they undermined the pragmatists and reformers in Iran who "had stuck out [their] neck and argued against hard-liners in Tehran, whose skepticism about America's trustworthiness appeared to have been proven right," and "strengthen[ed] . . . the hands of Iranian rejectionists, who argued that Washington would never come to terms with Iran voluntarily."⁷ In both instances, the result was to harden Iranian preferences and lower the chances of strategic rapprochement.

HOW MUCH OF A "NUCLEAR WEAPONS CAPABILITY" IS TOO MUCH?

Sebenius and Singh claim that Iran has a "keen interest in and is pursuing a nuclear weapons capability" (p. 59), which it deems "vital to its interest" (p. 69). At the same time, a major U.S. aim is to prevent Iran from acquiring such a capability. Because the two parties adopt mutually exclusive bargaining positions, the authors conclude that a ZOPA does not likely exist. Furthermore, they suggest that because Iran is rapidly moving toward a "nuclear weapons capability," little time remains for negotiation.

The authors, however, do not specify what a "nuclear weapons capability" entails, or how it differs from either what Iran now possesses or from what the United States is willing to tolerate. In fact, Iran likely already possesses the technical wherewithal to make a weapon. The key issue is whether it could do so without being detected and stopped, which depends on the effectiveness of the safeguards inspections regime in Iran as much as it does on the nuclear program's level of advancement. In overlooking this, the authors underestimate both the available space for compromise between the United States and Iran and the time it will likely take for Iran to have an unobstructed path to the bomb.

To argue that Iran is pushing toward a nuclear weapons capability, the authors point to Iran's work on "fuel fabrication, weaponization research, and missile delivery systems" (p. 60). Yet if technical wherewithal in these areas is the marker of a nuclear weapons capability, then Iran is likely already there. The 2010 Annual Threat Assessment, which the authors cite, makes this same judgment, stating that "Iran's technical advancement, particularly in uranium enrichment, strengthens our . . . assessment that Iran has the scientific, technical and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear

6. Guy Dinmore, "Washington Hardliners Wary of Engaging with Iran," *Financial Times*, March 16, 2004.

7. Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 155.

weapons, making the central issue its political will to do so.”⁸ Iran has already enriched uranium to the 20 percent level, and on a technical level would have little difficulty enriching enough weapons-grade uranium (> 90 percent level of enrichment) for a weapon.⁹ Likewise, Iran has in the past conducted research on nearly every step of the weaponization process, from the conversion of enriched uranium hexafluoride to uranium metal, to the conventional explosives needed to trigger a nuclear detonation, to the design of a warhead that could be mated to Iranian missiles.¹⁰ In other words, Iran has likely already crossed all of the technical thresholds necessary to be able to build a bomb. The only question is how long it would take.

The speed and ease with which Iran can acquire nuclear weapons, however, is not simply—or even primarily—a technical one.¹¹ The greatest barrier to weaponization is the risk of detection and interdiction. If Iran began to enrich uranium to weapons grade, the United States would detect it and would be able to intervene to stop the Iranians long before they could complete the task. Knowing this, the Iranians have little incentive to try. Instead, they are likely working to reduce the time it would take for a nuclear “breakout”—that is, the rapid production of the necessary components of a nuclear weapon—without taking steps so provocative that they would invite a preventive military attack. For example, if Iran were to stockpile enough uranium enriched to the 20 percent level for a weapon, it could, using its declared facilities, potentially enrich these stocks to weapons grade in a matter of months. Under existing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, however, this would likely be detected within several weeks, giving the United States time to intervene if it chose.¹² Iran could shorten the breakout time by deploying more advanced centrifuges, constructing secret enrichment facilities, or stockpiling enriched uranium at levels higher than 20 percent.

8. Dennis C. Blair, “U.S. Intelligence Community Annual Threat Assessment,” statement for the record for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Washington, D.C., February 2, 2010.

9. Iran would face a number of uncertainties and challenges if it were to enrich its existing uranium stocks to weapons grade, but the major questions would be how long it would take and how efficient the process would be, not whether or not it could do it. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Iran’s Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Capabilities* (London: IISS, 2011), pp. 68–75; and Robert J. Reardon, *Containing Iran: Strategies for Addressing the Iran Nuclear Challenge* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2012), pp. 52–64.

10. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and Relevant Provisions of Security Council Resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” GOV/2011/65 (Vienna: IAEA, November 8, 2011).

11. Citing unnamed American officials, the *New York Times* reported that “the United States believed international inspectors would detect an Iranian move toward breakout within weeks, leaving a considerable amount of time for the United States to consider military strikes.” Mark Mazzetti and David E. Sanger, “U.S. Assures Israel That Iran Threat Is Not Imminent,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2010.

12. The IISS estimates in its Strategic Dossier that the United States would be alerted to a breakout within three weeks. If Iran were to stockpile enough 20 percent enriched uranium for a weapon—a line it has so far taken efforts not to cross—according to the IISS’s estimates, it could enrich these stocks to weapons grade in four months. The Institute for Science and International Security provides an estimate closer to two months. Both estimates assume ideal conditions that are unlikely to occur in reality. The estimates also do not include the time required for the steps between producing highly enriched uranium and building a deliverable weapon. IISS, *Iran’s Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Capabilities*, pp. 71–72; and William C. Witt, Christina Walrond, David Albright, and Houston Wood, “Iran’s Evolving Breakout Potential,” ISIS Report (Washington, D.C.: ISIS, October 8, 2012).

None of these options would be easy for Iran to achieve, however, and it is unlikely Iran can shorten breakout times in the near future sufficiently to provide a viable route to even a single nuclear weapon.

Thus, instead of the authors' description of Iran's nuclear capability as a continuum along a single dimension, ranging between nuclear weapons and no enrichment capability, there are actually two dimensions to Iran's nuclear program that define a ZOPA: Iran's technical capacity to enrich uranium and the stringency and reliability of the safeguards and inspections regime under which Iran's program is placed. The United States and Iran might be willing to agree to a deal that leaves Iran with a relatively advanced enrichment capability, so long as the program is kept under IAEA safeguards that are stringent enough to assure the United States and its allies that Iran has not begun a race for the bomb, and that if Iran were to do so, the United States would be able to detect it quickly enough to stop it.

A DEAL IS POSSIBLE

Negotiations are a means of achieving an end state acceptable to both parties, but by treating preferences as fixed before negotiations begin, Sebenius and Singh present an unnecessarily pessimistic image of what U.S.-Iran negotiations can achieve.

The authors' pessimism is deepened by their suggestion that Iran's preference for maintaining significant nuclear capabilities and the United States' preference for Iran not to acquire nuclear arms are mutually exclusive positions. This conclusion is flawed by its ambiguous and misleading use of the term "nuclear weapons capability." Iran likely already possesses the technical wherewithal to make a nuclear weapon, but would be unable to do so quickly enough to avoid detection and intervention by the United States and its allies. It is far from clear that Iran and the United States could not agree to an arrangement under which Iran retains many of its existing nuclear capabilities while agreeing to a sufficiently stringent safeguards regime to satisfy U.S. concerns about a breakout.

The possibility of a negotiated settlement is greater than Sebenius and Singh describe. The very instruments that the authors suggest might be most useful to making an agreement more likely, however—increased economic sanctions and more credible demonstrations of the United States' willingness to use military force—risk making a deal harder to achieve, not easier. If the United States' goal is truly not regime change but to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, it can best achieve it by credibly offering security assurances and the lifting of sanctions.

—Robert Reardon
Cambridge, Massachusetts

James K. Sebenius and Michael K. Singh Reply:

Although we disagree with their analyses, we appreciate the opportunity to address the responses of Paul Pillar and Richard Reardon to our recent article.¹ Like Pillar and Reardon, we seek a negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear challenge that is better

1. James K. Sebenius and Michael K. Singh, "Is a Nuclear Deal with Iran Possible? An Analytical Framework for the Iran Nuclear Negotiations," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 52–91. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

than what many analysts see as two undesirable options: acquiescing to a nuclear-armed Iran or mounting a military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

In their letters, Pillar and Reardon frequently conflate two classes of objections to our analysis of the United States' nuclear negotiations with Iran: (1) modest objections to the analytic framework that we develop to assess the largely neglected but fundamental question about whether a zone of possible agreement (ZOPA) between the two countries even exists, and (2) extensive objections to the set of substantive assessments or policy inputs (i.e., about the parties' interests) that we use to illustrate the use and implications of the framework.² In responding to the Pillar and Reardon critiques, we disentangle these objections and deal with each in turn.

Pillar and Reardon's technical objections to our framework are either mistaken or easily accommodated analytically. This is fortunate, because we regard the framework as the most basic contribution of our article to a debate that often inconclusively bounces between divergent tactical and process recommendations, but that does not rigorously address the underlying question of whether a ZOPA even exists—a necessary condition for a deal to be struck. In an effort to go beyond endlessly dueling assessments, we offer a framework that furnishes the means for addressing this core issue by precisely incorporating preferred assessments of each side's interests, no-deal options, and cost-imposing and value-enhancing moves. Of course, such preferred assessments could be ours, Pillar's, Reardon's, or those of others.

In stark, oversimplified form, our analysis suggests that if one accepts our assessments of the interests of the hard-line Iranian regime (that it seeks nuclear weapons as a high priority) and its perceptions of its no-deal options (that, without a change in apparent U.S. policy at the time of our writing, the regime, by cautiously proceeding, will eventually obtain weapons or the virtual capacity to weaponize), then a zone of possible agreement did not likely exist at the time the article was written. If this analysis is correct, rather than focusing on negotiating tactics and processes (to adopt a tough or soft style, to approach directly or indirectly, bilaterally, or through the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany [P5+1], etc.), opening up a ZOPA calls for a combination of cost-imposing and/or value-enhancing measures that need certain attributes to be effective (i.e., they must be credible, meaningful to the hard-line regime, and of the right magnitude).

Put in similarly stark fashion, if one accepts Pillar's and Reardon's assessments of the interests of the hard-line Iranian regime and its perceptions of its likely no-deal options (an ever-more threatening United States as evidenced by intensifying sanctions and heightening war threats), then a large ZOPA should open up (that would include agreement on a well-monitored peaceful Iranian nuclear program) if the United States

2. Pillar also ascribes to us views that we neither state nor hold. For example, he alleges that we "repeatedly describe [our] assumptions as 'mainstream,' implying that they are uncontroversial and any differing ones are too extreme to be worth considering." This implication is untrue; we respectfully cite differing assessments (e.g., those of Kenneth Waltz and George Lopez) in our article to show how they can be accommodated in our framework. Pillar further claims that "[m]any readers' principal takeaway . . . will be that a zone of possible agreement probably did not exist as of the time of their writing and probably will not exist unless the United States takes steps toward going to war with Iran." We can hardly be held responsible for what readers will allegedly take away from our analysis, especially conclusions that we have not reached or stated, but Pillar's latter claim simply ignores a major element of our framework, discussed and analyzed over several pages, on the potential role of value-enhancing moves/incentives in opening or widening a ZOPA.

credibly signals its benign intentions by dropping sanctions and threats; forswearing regime change; and offering security guarantees, respect, and other value-enhancing measures that have independent value and augur a better underlying relationship between the two nations.

We leave it to readers and policymakers, and to a later section of this response, to judge the plausibility of these competing assessments along with the divergent prescriptions they imply. We begin, however, by evaluating Pillar's and Reardon's objections to our framework, which we believe are without merit.

ANALYTIC OBJECTIONS

First, both Pillar and Reardon take our analysis to task for what they allege is our "static" framework (Pillar) with fixed bargaining preferences that are "constant throughout the negotiating process" (Reardon). In their critique, our framework suffers from a "failure to reflect how the value of possible outcomes to the two parties and especially to Iran is likely to vary greatly depending on other circumstances" (Pillar), which they elaborate to include the "temperature of the relationship with the United States" (Pillar) and "how the bargaining process itself—indeed, the overall course of U.S.-Iranian relations—can influence the preferences of both states" (Reardon).

In the article, we did not vary the preferences of each side in part for simplicity of exposition, but mainly because we doubt that the two side's preferences would meaningfully change over any realistic estimate of the time frame of the negotiations. In such a case, it is entirely appropriate to portray the effects of cost-imposing and value-enhancing moves with vertical shifts in outcome desirability—as we do in the article, rather than as shifts in policy preferences.

Although it is a common criticism of formal bargaining models (such as ours) that they are necessarily fixed or static, the claim is in general simplistic and wrong.³ In particular, there is no analytic reason that policy preferences cannot vary as a function of tactics or of the state of relations between Iran and the United States, or both. Indeed, any graphical representation of preferences is implicitly conditional on the state of relations between the two nations. For example, it is easy to graph two "frontiers" of policy preferences over possible agreements with frontier A conditional on, say, "bad relations or disrespectful tactics" (in which Iran's hard-line regime prefers a "more nuclear" outcome and the United States prefers the opposite) and frontier B conditional on "good relations or cooperative tactics" (in which Iran credibly has no nuclear weapons ambitions and the United States is relatively unconcerned about the issue). It is analytically possible, if one accepts a strong form of the assessments of Pillar and Reardon, that sanctions and threats could shift the game to frontier A, whereas the absence of sanctions and threats plus respect and inducements could credibly shift the game to more appealing frontier B. In short, this analytic objection is misguided. It is the divergent assessments that are really at issue.

3. For a moderately technical discussion of this point with many references, see James K. Sebenius, "Negotiation Analysis: A Characterization and Review," *Management Science*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January 1992), pp. 1–21; James K. Sebenius, "Negotiation Analysis: From Games to Inferences to Decisions to Deals," *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 2009), pp. 449–465; and James K. Sebenius, "International Negotiation Analysis," in Victor Kremenyuk, ed., *International Negotiation: Analysis, Approaches, Issues*, 2d ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2002), pp. 229–252.

Second, Pillar correctly notes that beyond the nuclear focus, “there are other significant issues that divide the two countries and are part of the bargaining relationship between them.” This kind of critique could, of course, be leveled at virtually any issue-specific negotiation analysis from trade (when monetary issues or labor mobility or environmental questions are also of mutual concern to the parties) to environment (when economic and security issues are arguably linked) and so on. The relevant question is the purpose of the analysis and the value of extending it all the way to a full-blown grand bargain entailing all issues of mutual concern. Our analysis is robust enough to have explicitly considered and incorporated issues such as agricultural assistance, trade agreements, assistance with civil aviation, counternarcotics, cooperation on Afghan security, technical and energy assistance, regional security, and territorial integrity. The only issue Pillar mentions in connection with his charge of an overly narrow focus is frozen Iranian assets, which could easily be incorporated into our analysis of value-enhancing incentives—and could be negotiated directly between the parties in our formal setup.

Third, Pillar asserts that “relief from sanctions is . . . a leading reason Tehran has for reaching an agreement with the United States” and that “the utility functions would look much different from the way Sebenius and Singh portray them” had we taken into account sanctions relief. Given that we extensively analyze how removal of sanctions and related measures serve as incentives and raise the value of a deal, this charge seems misguided unless there is a compelling reason to fold sanctions relief into underlying nuclear policy preferences. Similarly, Pillar asserts that our static framework does not capture the potential value of perceived respect to the Iranians. As an analytic objection, this does carry weight; if one assesses perceived respect—either as a function of bargaining style or as associated with issues possessing symbolic attributes such as participation in regional security architecture or diplomatic recognition—it can easily be represented in our framework as a value-enhancing incentive that shifts (upward) the value of a deal reached in such a manner or with such provisions.

In a mirror image of this objection, Pillar commits an analytic error. Based on our assessments, we indicate that the hard-line regime would find a large arsenal of nuclear weapons more desirable than a small one, a latent capability to weaponize, and so on. Pillar contests this alleged Iranian preference by citing a U.S. intelligence community assessment that “it does not know if Iran will ever decide to build a nuclear weapon.” Such a statement almost certainly confounds the independent desirability to the hard-line regime of nuclear weapons with the likely consequences (risk of attack, harsher sanctions, isolation, etc.) of trying to obtain them. To clarify the analytic point by example, a potential thief may display a strong preference to have a great deal of money but may not have made the decision to rob a bank to get it—given the likely consequences. In such a case, it would be perfectly reasonable analytically to posit the thief’s desire for money as a strong preference, separable from the adverse consequences of committing a robbery.

Moreover, as both an analytic and practical matter, Pillar and Reardon often ignore a vital element of our framework—each side’s perception of its no-deal alternatives—which has a powerful bearing on potential negotiation outcomes. Remember that an apparently superior no-deal option to one side or the other will preclude agreements and may imply that a ZOPA does not exist. For example, Reardon claims that “because the two parties [Iran and the United States] adopt mutually exclusive bargaining posi-

tions, the authors conclude that a ZOPA does not likely exist." We do not and would not make such a claim without considering the desirability of no-deal options. Contrary to this assertion, incompatible bargaining positions frequently characterize negotiating situations. What determines the existence of a ZOPA is not stated positions, but the perceptions by one or both parties of the attractiveness of no-deal options relative to potential deals.

While highlighting the central role of no-deal options is less familiar in much of the international relations literature than is highlighting the parties' interests or positions, relatively appealing walkaway possibilities can easily explain many impasses. If, for example, you offer me a genuinely fair price for my house, no deal may be consummated between us if I have a yet higher offer than yours from another party (my superior no-deal option relative to our potential transaction). Reardon and Pillar separately offer the outlines of plausible-sounding deals—roughly, that Iran gets some enrichment capacity with sufficient International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards—that for some reason have not been accepted. Logically, that reason may well entail Iranian perceptions that no deal might better serve its interests.

In short, Pillar's and Reardon's analytic critiques of our framework do not appear valid. Moreover, the authors commit some fairly basic—but regrettably common—errors of analysis when discussing bargaining situations. Of course, many of their criticisms amount to disagreements regarding our assertions of fact or assessments regarding Iranian activities and interests, U.S. interests, and the effects of various policy tools we describe. This is unsurprising, given their controversial and highly consequential nature. Indeed, the criticisms bear out the caveat in our article that these matters are "frequently contested among analysts and policymakers alike, and are shaped by distrust and partisan perceptions" (p. 58). We constructed the framework itself to be hospitable to a range of such assessments and to answer an underlying fundamental question.

OBJECTIONS TO ASSESSMENTS

Both Pillar and Reardon take exception to our observation that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, which mirrors the Director of National Intelligence's 2012 assessment that "Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons, in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so." Reardon suggests that the term "nuclear weapons capability" is vague, and that Iran already possesses the technical knowledge to produce nuclear weapons.

Broadly speaking, producing a nuclear weapon requires the mastery (or acquisition) of three elements: nuclear fuel, such as weapons-grade enriched uranium; the ability to "weaponize" that fuel so as to trigger a nuclear explosion; and a delivery vehicle for that weapon, such as a ballistic missile. Iran's interest in all three elements is not theoretical; it is demonstrated—Iran's uranium enrichment activities and weaponization research are catalogued by the IAEA⁴, and the country has the largest ballistic missile

4. See, for example, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and Relevant Provisions of Security Council Resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," report by the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, GOV/2013/6, February 21, 2013, http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_Safeguards_report_—21_Feb_2013.pdf.

arsenal in the Middle East.⁵ Thus Iran is developing the capability to produce nuclear weapons, regardless of whether it ultimately decides to produce them.

These activities lead directly to the U.S. intelligence assessment we cite, and cast grave doubts on the avowed peaceful intent of Iran's nuclear program. We do not dismiss the Iranian actions mentioned by Pillar to portray Iran's nuclear activities in a peaceful light, such as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's reported fatwa regarding the impermissibility of nuclear weapons or Iranian actions to convert some of its 20 percent enriched uranium into oxide form. The relevance of the reported fatwa has been called into question, however;⁶ and in any event, it is undermined by Iran's actions, which include research into the very process of weaponization supposedly deemed "sinful" by Khamenei.

Pillar's assertion that Iran has converted "a substantial proportion of the uranium it has enriched to the 20 percent level into fuel plates for a nuclear reactor" is a misreading of the technical information found in the IAEA report he cites. In fact, Iran had produced at least 280 kilograms of 20 percent enriched uranium as of February 2013, of which 111 kilograms had been sent for conversion into uranium oxide form, which, according to former IAEA Deputy Director General Olli Heinonen, can be reconverted into hexafluoride form (i.e., the form fed into enrichment centrifuges) within a week.⁷ Only 50 kilograms of uranium oxide had been produced, however, and only a small amount of that had been used for manufacturing fuel plates, which would presumably be harder to reconvert to hexafluoride form.

Furthermore, Iran's nuclear program is characterized by a history of deception and denial—both of Iran's uranium enrichment facilities were secret until exposed by Western intelligence, and Tehran has still not responded to IAEA questions regarding its weaponization research. As a result, we deem these actions—as Pillar seems to—tactical measures aimed at influencing perceptions rather than indicators that Iran's interest in a nuclear weapons capability has changed.

As for Reardon's suggestion that Iran "already possesses the technical wherewithal to make a weapon," this has little bearing on the question of whether a ZOPA exists. It is, for practical reasons, primarily Iranian actions and capabilities—in this case, further progress in enrichment, weaponization, and certain other activities—not knowledge that the negotiations seek to limit. Iran may or may not possess the knowledge and matériel to produce a nuclear weapon; if it does, it has not actually done so, nor has it yet produced any weapons-grade nuclear fuel, which is a prerequisite for production of a weapon and the most easily detectable one, and thus the primary focus of the nuclear negotiations.

Pillar takes exception to our characterization of a large nuclear arsenal as the out-

5. Steven A. Hildreth, "Iran's Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Program" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 6, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R42849.pdf>.

6. Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji, "Nuclear Fatwa," Policy Focus No. 115 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2011).

7. Olli Heinonen and Simon Henderson, "Iran's Nuclear Clock and World Diplomacy," PolicyWatch, No. 2046 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 15, 2013).

come most favorable for Iran. We treat a large nuclear arsenal as more favorable to Iran than a more modest nuclear weapons capability because a “pre-weaponized” program or an arsenal of one or just a few nuclear weapons is presumably far more vulnerable to attack—and therefore less useful—than a large nuclear arsenal, which is presumably why all nuclear powers have chosen to produce many nuclear weapons. In the same vein, Reardon notes that, in seeking to actually produce a nuclear weapon, Iran would face a grave risk of detection and punishment. But both Pillar and Reardon miss a key point: the outcomes along our deal frontier are negotiation outcomes and are ordered in terms of preference if they could be achieved costlessly—a significant caveat. The fact that such outcomes cannot be achieved costlessly is what impels a negotiation in the first place, and underlies the concept of a “no-deal option” as described in our article. Any particular outcome is tenable only if both sides consider it superior (in terms of net cost/benefit) to their no-deal option, which in this case may be a military conflict.

Pillar suggests that the U.S. position as stated by President Barack Obama prior to his re-election in November 2012—that the United States will not permit Iran to possess a nuclear weapons capability, however vaguely defined—is not necessarily the actual U.S. red line. It is worth noting that President Obama has repeated his 2012 statements several times, in different forums, since being reelected, undermining Pillar’s implication that the statement we cite was made simply in response to the venue or timing of the speech that contained it. U.S. actions have backed up Obama’s professed red line, as P5+1 offers (and Israeli warnings) have consistently sought to limit Iran’s enrichment to 5 percent, which therefore seems at present to be the true American red line.

Pillar, however, correctly notes later—in describing Iranian suspicions that the true U.S. objective is “regime change”—that one party’s perception of the other’s red line is vital. Here the United States has arguably sent mixed messages, as U.S. officials have cast doubt on Washington’s willingness to use force to prevent Iran from producing nuclear weapons, even as President Obama has warned that the “military option” rather than “containment” remains the alternative to a negotiated agreement. The perception that the United States would in fact accept—even tacitly—a far “more nuclear” Iran than its red line indicates risks conveying the impression to Iranian negotiators that the “true” U.S. red line is far more accommodating than the one publicly stated by President Obama and reflected in P5+1 offers to date.

Taken together, Pillar’s assertions that both Iranian and U.S. red lines are much more accommodating than we assume could be illustrated in the framework, and would likely result in a very large ZOPA. This, however, would leave one to wonder why no agreement has been reached despite the presence of such a capacious ZOPA, and despite the variety of tactics, processes, and deals that have been attempted by the United States and other negotiators. Taken to the extreme posited by Kenneth Waltz—that a nuclear-armed Iran would be beneficial to the United States⁸—one finds little reason for negotiations at all, because it would not be in the U.S. interest to limit Iran’s nuclear progress. We find it more likely, based on assumptions drawn from examining U.S. and Iranian actions, that U.S. and Iranian interests and no-deal options are as we describe them in the article, and that no ZOPA existed as of the writing of the article.

8. Kenneth Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (July/August 2012).

COSTS AND INCENTIVES

Both Pillar and Reardon dispute our characterization of the effects of costs on the presence and size of a ZOPA. Pillar suggests that military threats are ineffective or even counterproductive. Reardon posits that sanctions and threats create an “escalatory dynamic,” hardening Iranian resistance, which then fuels calls for more pressure in the United States. He asserts that incentives, on the other hand, could give rise to a virtuous cycle, strengthen moderate voices in Iran, create a ZOPA, and lead to an agreement. Reardon attempts to support his argument by citing historical instances of U.S. coercion and “reluctance to reciprocate Iranian diplomatic openings . . . [leading] to a hardening of Iran’s bargaining position.”

Reardon’s history is superficial, however, and his facts appear selected to serve his conclusion rather than to develop an understanding of the efficacy of pressure and outreach in influencing Iran. Reardon does not mention, for example, Iranian assassinations on European soil in the late 1980s or early 1990s, Tehran’s rising support for Palestinian terrorist groups amid the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the same decade, Iran’s involvement in the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, or for that matter its secret nuclear work during the 1990s and 2000s. Nor does he mention the series of unrequited unilateral gestures made in the late 1990s by President Bill Clinton’s administration toward the administration of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami—including several attempts at direct negotiations, all rebuffed by Iran, and a public apology for the U.S. role in deposing Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, which was quickly dismissed by Supreme Leader Khamenei. None of this implies that the United States did not miss opportunities to improve relations with Iran, but it undermines Reardon’s suggestion that the history of U.S.-Iran relations is characterized by U.S. coercion and reluctance to talk; the reality is far more complicated and defies easy summarization.

What neither Pillar nor Reardon acknowledge is that pressure has apparently worked against Iran in the past. It is widely believed that military pressure from the United States was instrumental in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s decision to accept a cease-fire ending the Iran-Iraq War in 1989, and that the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and pressure resulting from the public exposure of the Natanz uranium enrichment facility in 2002 were vital to Iran’s apparent suspension of weaponization research in 2003. Again, these facts should not be taken to imply that inducements have no place in creating or widening a ZOPA; indeed, our article argues that they can. Instead, they undermine the notion advanced by Pillar and Reardon that pressure is counterproductive in achieving U.S. objectives or negotiated outcomes.

Reardon further argues that we neglect the effect that safeguards would have on a ZOPA. He asserts that a thorough safeguards and inspection regime would make a “more nuclear” Iran more palatable to the United States; in our framework, this would translate into a leftward shift of the U.S. red line or no-deal option. Intrusive inspections and careful safeguards, however are bound to be a requirement of any nuclear agreement between the P5+1 and Iran, regardless of the nuclear activities Iran is permitted. The importance of those safeguards will not vary with the scale of Iran’s nuclear program, because it would be just as important to verify that Iran is complying with an agreement not to enrich any uranium as it would be to verify its compliance with an agreement to limit itself to production of 20 percent enriched uranium. If anything—contrary to Reardon’s notion that safeguards would enable the United

States to accept a more expansive Iranian nuclear program—a safeguards and inspection regime would be harder to enforce, more susceptible to error, and thus provide less reassurance as Iran’s nuclear program grows in size and scope. On the other hand, the requirement that genuinely intrusive inspections and safeguards attend any nuclear deal could act as a “reverse incentive” for Iran, shifting the deal frontier leftward and constricting any ZOPA that may have existed.

CONCLUSION

In sum, we return to our original analysis and conclusions: that only through cost-imposing and value-enhancing measures can a ZOPA be created and widened. No such ZOPA has yet been created, according to our analysis, but smart diplomacy still holds the prospect of doing so.

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