

Commentary Magazine

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During the last decade both the Obama administration and its predecessor went down the garden path with Iran several times. Yet every time Washington believed the Islamist regime was finally embracing diplomacy and that a solution to the standoff over Tehran's nuclear ambitions was imminent, the ayatollahs pulled the rug out from under its gullible Western adversaries. This has happened so many times that one would think it would be impossible for the Iranians to pull off this trick again but it appears that the United States is about to play Charlie Brown to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Lucy Van Pelt and her football again.

Using its usual anonymous sources within the Obama administration, the New York Times is claiming that Iran has sent a clear signal to the West that it is ready negotiate about its nuclear program. The paper reports that according to unnamed government officials Iran has slowed down its enrichment of uranium in recent months. The use of what is described as a "significant amount" of material for a small medical reactor may affect Iran's nuclear timetable. This has led the U.S. to believe that the Iranians are sending a signal to the West that it is ready to negotiate rather than to continue to stonewall the world on the issue:

One American official said the move amounted to trying to "put more time on the clock to solve this," characterizing it as a step "you have to assume was highly calculated, because everything the Iranians do in a negotiation is highly calculated."

No doubt it was calculated but there is plenty of reason to doubt that calculation has anything to do with a desire to negotiate an end to their program — the goal that President Obama said was the only sort of compromise he would accept during his foreign policy debate with Mitt Romney.

The diversion to the medical reactor was reportedly the reason why Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak thought that the deadline for stopping Iran had been moved back to late spring/early summer 2013. But since even according to these estimates Iran will have enough fuel for a weapon in only a few months that doesn't really alter President Obama's dilemma.

The international sanctions imposed on Iran have created a great deal of pain for ordinary Iranians but haven't altered the regime's determination to press ahead toward a nuclear weapon one jot. The increased pace of enrichment and the move of most of their material to a hardened underground mountain facility at Fordow have been a flagrant demonstration of the regime's contempt for the West's calls for them to stop. In this context, the diversion to the medical reactor seems more like a tactical move designed to generate more U.S. confidence in diplomacy — boosted by articles in the Times — than a strategic decision to back away from their nuclear goal. If so, it has achieved exactly what they wanted at the cost of only a slight

delay in their schedule.

So long as the administration and its European allies are convinced their diplomatic efforts have hope — no matter how faint or unrealistic that hope might be — the Iranians can rest assured that there is little danger of the president making good on his promise to do whatever it is necessary in order to forestall this threat.

After so many examples in recent years of Iran gulling the West on this issue it is difficult to understand why the administration would even think about falling for the same trick again. The only possible reason to grasp onto such a hope would be the fact that neither the president nor any of his current foreign policy team or their second term replacements are really interested in a confrontation with Tehran even over an issue as serious as this.

That's why, as was the case in the past with similar diplomatic dead-ends pursued by first the George W. Bush administration and then its successor, a willingness to believe in the possibility of a diplomatic opening with Iran has more to do with a desire to punt on the issue rather than any sincere belief that a deal is even possible. It remains to be seen whether President Obama really means what he says about keeping all options on the table if diplomacy with Iran conclusively fails. But so long as his administration is determined to fall for every Iranian deception, there is little likelihood that promise will ever be put to the test until it is already too late to do anything about the threat.