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Sleepwalking toward a nuclear Iran
By Lawrence J. Haas

Great athletes describe how, during moments of success, they feel as if time is slowing down so that – whether they are leading a fast break or awaiting a 95-mile-an-hour pitch – they see the game unfold in a kind of slow motion.

In the arena of public affairs, we, too, have the power to step back and watch a new world unfold as if in slow motion. What seemed like disparate events as they occurred over the course of weeks, months or longer can, upon reflection, reveal a consistent pattern of activity with a predictable conclusion.

And so it is with Iran's nuclear program.

As if in a slow motion trance, the world is moving toward the reality of an Iran with nuclear weapons. Nothing – not the endless promises of Western leaders to prevent it, the mounting concerns of Iran's neighbors, the dire ramifications for regional and global security, or even the burden of history that will weigh down the legacy of today's leaders – seems likely to stand in the way.

The symbolic is often the most telling, so it's symbolic that *Foreign Affairs* carries a piece in its current issue from two Council on Foreign Relations scholars who outline an agenda through which the United States can “contain” a nuclear Iran. Never mind that the case by James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh is utterly unconvincing, advocating steps that helped bring us to this point to begin with.

That Tehran continues to march inexorably toward the goal of nuclear weaponry, with more sites enriching more uranium at higher levels of purity, is apparent from the almost daily drumbeat of headlines.

On Saturday, the *New York Times* reported that international inspectors and Western intelligence agencies suspect Iran is building more enrichment sites. A top Iranian official said recently that work on two sites would begin soon.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who reportedly ordered the work on the new sites, a few days earlier dismissed Western efforts to derail Tehran's progress, saying, “Rest assured that your efforts will be fruitless.”

You could hardly blame him. While Ahmadinejad was boasting, Western leaders were again threatening strong action against Tehran but offering little evidence that they would follow through. It was merely the most recent scene in an all-too-real play that has dominated the world stage for nearly a decade.

“It is time,” Canadian Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon said yesterday, “for the international community to take appropriate steps to persuade Iran” to abandon its drive for nuclear weaponry.

But while, also yesterday, President Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy expressed hope for new sanctions against Iran, U.S. officials were already working behind the scenes to soften any such sanctions in order to gain Chinese and Russian assent for the necessary United Nations Security Council resolution.

Why a fourth resolution would prove more effective than the earlier three (in 2006, 2007, and 2008) in convincing Tehran to change course was unclear. Why Tehran would believe Western threats of new sanctions by this spring was unclear as well, since Obama had originally sought new sanctions by the end of 2009.

The longer that sanctions prove ineffective – either because the Iranian regime can weather the economic pressure or because Beijing and Moscow will never approve the “crippling” sanctions that Western leaders had promised – the likelier that the world will face the unhappy prospect of a nuclear Iran or military action to prevent it.

Why Tehran would worry about military action is increasingly unclear as well. U.S. and other Western leaders may say that “all options” remain “on the table,” but they seem more determined to assure their domestic audiences that military action isn’t coming than to warn Iran that it could occur.

The one nation whose threat to strike Iran’s nuclear sites is believable is Israel, which views Iran as an existential threat – and for good reason. Iranian threats to eliminate the Jewish State, in fact to use nuclear weaponry to do so, far predate the ugly words of its current president, the Holocaust-denying Ahmadinejad.

But, as Tehran pushes ahead on the technology and know-how of nuclear weaponry, increasingly strained relations between Washington and Jerusalem complicate the latter’s calculations of when, or if, to strike.

Israel may be America’s most important ally in the Middle East, but the two nations view the region far differently. Jerusalem is most focused on Iran, while Washington clings to the quaint notion that Israeli-Palestinian peace will create the conditions for progress on all other issues, including Iran’s nuclear program.

In Tehran, the mullahs are surely enjoying the show – empty Western rhetoric, Chinese and Russian interference, missed deadlines for action, U.S.-Israeli discord, and, in the end, an Iran with nukes.