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West must stop appeasing, start pressuring Iran
By Lawrence J. Haas

In the West's approach to Iran, we are witnessing a classic example of appeasement toward not just a rising threat to Middle East stability but a growing global threat to freedom and democracy.

Most recently, this appeasement has taken two forms. First, leading European nations announced plans to offer Iran new incentives to halt its nuclear weapons program (even though Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, continues to dismiss the very idea of incentives out of hand). Second, foreign policy experts are pressuring the United States to open talks with Iran.

Rather than offer incentives and dialogue, the United States and its allies should raise the pressure on Iran. They should make clear that, while the West wants to resolve its dispute peacefully, it will do whatever it must to ensure the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism does not get the bomb.

Even after enduring severe global criticism for bypassing the United Nations and crafting its own coalition of the willing on Iraq, the United States must be prepared to do much the same on Iran. With Russia and China likely to continue blocking calls to serious action by the UN Security Council, such as sanctions, the United States must be prepared to choose its own national security interests and those of its allies over the UN's blessing of its actions.

At this point, you can hardly blame Iran's leaders for not taking the West seriously. The prospect of new incentives and the calls for a direct U.S.-Iran dialogue come after months of rising threats and belligerence by Tehran, followed by Western squabbling over the appropriate response and an inconsistent message from the United States about what it's willing to do.

Consider just a few recent examples of Tehran's bellicosity:

Ahmadinejad continues to hurl threats to eliminate Israel, characterizing the Jewish State in the most vile terms, and he repeatedly raises questions about whether the Holocaust ever occurred.

The Iranian Army's Chief of Joint Staff, General Abdorrahim Musavi, discussed his nation's war plans with the United States in an interview last month on Iranian television, calling "the criminal America" Iran's number one enemy, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute.

Earlier this month, CNN reported that the International Atomic Energy Agency found traces of highly enriched uranium at an Iranian site linked to the country's defense ministry. The density of enrichment was apparently at, or close to, levels needed to make nuclear bombs.

And while the United States was seeking a Security Council resolution to demand that Iran stop its nuclear work, Ahmadinejad bellowed that he did not give a damn about such resolutions.

Western behavior to date has only encouraged this bellicosity.

Though Ahmadinejad's initial threat to annihilate Israel provoked admirable outrage in Western capitals, the more recent ones elicited little response, enabling Ahmadinejad to ratchet up the rhetoric with impunity.

The United States, seeking to repair relations with Europe after their friction over Iraq, deferred to Great Britain, France, and Germany as they sought negotiations to convince Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions. The Iranians dragged out these negotiations for several years, giving them time to make more progress on the nuclear front, as Iranian leaders have boasted.

Now, European leaders are making clear that new negotiations over their offer of new incentives are not backed by any serious threat of action if they fail. French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin recently ruled out military force, arguing such a step would "settle nothing."

In their fixation with negotiation, at least the Europeans are consistent. The United States has been downright schizophrenic.

On occasion, U.S. leaders vow to block Iran's nuclear ambitions, reminding the world that all options are on the table. But, hoping to repair relations with its talk-happy allies, U.S. leaders more often reassure them that they plan to resolve the crisis diplomatically. As Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice put it late last month, "Iran is not Iraq."

The problem is, each reassurance to the talk-happy Europeans emboldens the dismissive Iranians.

In the end, the United States must send the same message to our European allies and Iran. Diplomacy is more likely to work if backed by a credible threat of force.

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