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America's Empty Gestures toward Iran

By Stephen M. Walt

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Even if you stayed up since Friday and skipped the finale of *Breaking Bad*, there's no way you could have kept up with all the commentary about the U.S.-Iranian minuet at the U.N. General Assembly opening last week. There was a lot of spinning going on, of course, with proponents of a nuclear deal looking for reasons to be optimistic and die-hard opponents looking for signs that it was all just a bad dream.

For a conventional assessment of where things now stand, I recommend **Richard Haass's piece** today in the *Financial Times*. Haass notes the various obstacles that still remain and argues that the two sides have reached a tacit agreement on the end point of negotiations but not the sequence of events. In other words, he thinks there's already something of an understanding on the terms of a nuclear deal (i.e., how much nuclear capability Iran will be allowed to retain), but what needs to be worked out is the pace at which elements of Iran's nuclear program are given up and the pace at which economic sanctions are lifted.

Haass also believes the political obstacles to a deal are formidable, especially on the Iranian side. In making this claim, he offered a classic illustration of the biases that warp U.S. efforts to deal with countries like Iran. Here's the sentence that caught my eye:

It was also that Mr Obama's UN address gave Iran quite a lot -- no US desire for regime change; acceptance of Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear programme - but Mr Rouhani offered little in return.

For Haass (and many other Americans, one suspects), Obama was being incredibly generous last week. In Haass's mind, saying that the world's most powerful country won't seek regime change in Iran is a wonderful gift, a lavish sign of American goodwill. Never mind that overthrowing the Iranian regime would be an illegal act of war. Never mind that Haass would probably not see a pledge by Rouhani that Iran does not seek regime change in America as giving the United States "quite a lot."

This attitude is symptomatic of an enduring U.S. foreign-policy mindset: Overthrowing other governments is just one of those "normal" options that we keep in our foreign-policy tool kit, and telling another country we won't actually use it this time is a really big sacrifice on our part. Haass probably thinks it is, because he was **openly calling** for the United States to topple the clerics back in 2010. And he now thinks those pesky Iranians ought to be grateful that Obama didn't follow his advice.

Similarly, it is not an act of generosity for the United States to "accept" Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program. That right is enshrined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), of which Iran is a signatory. Full stop. Iran is also one of the most heavily inspected countries on Earth, and neither the International Atomic Energy Agency nor the U.S. intelligence community believes that Iran has a nuclear *weapons* program at present. Iran did violate some of its NPT obligations in the past, and there are valid reasons to wonder about its long-term nuclear aims. Reaching agreement on additional safeguards is likely to be essential to any future nuclear deal, and the United States (and others) should press for them. But Iranians see their "right" to a peaceful program as something they already possess; it is not a gift or a concession or a sign of U.S. goodwill. From their perspective, there was no need for Rouhani to offer up something in return.

To be clear: I found last week's events heartening, though we have a long way to go before we get an actual agreement, and this initiative won't be a success until it gets all the way across the finish line. But a good way to derail this process is for Americans to believe that we are making lots of big concessions or gifts -- and getting little for them. And my guess is that we're going to hear a lot of people making that sort of argument in the weeks and months ahead.