

Diplomacy or War: Reflections on U.S. Negotiations with Iran in 2015 and Japan in 1941

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Today, large areas of the Middle East and Africa are incurring devastating human costs as the result of military violence. Both regions are plagued by high death tolls and massive economic losses. Explosive border tensions exist in Eastern Europe, Korea, South Asia, the South China Sea, and elsewhere. In 1941, international security was in an equally perilous position. War gripped much of Europe and Asia. The United States may not have been the singular world power then that it is today, but its leaders had decisions to make about America's role in maintaining global stability for the sake of all nations and for the security of the United States itself. To control one of the major international threats—the power and ambition of Japan—U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull negotiated for weeks with Kichisaburo Nomura, Japan's ambassador to the United States, seeking to avoid war and to reestablish some form of working relationship between their countries. Diplomacy failed and war resulted in 1941. Can that experience inform today's challenge?

The current arguments for and against the Iran nuclear deal often present a choice between diplomacy and war. Administration spokesmen, including the president and secretary of state, argue that negotiating with hardened Iranian adversaries reduces threats and paves the way for continued dialogue on still intractable issues. Their critics argue that the threat or actual use of military force, which could mean war, is the only real safeguard of U.S. and global security. Both sides introduce the prospect of war into the equation. The administration sees the danger of war as reason for compromise, and its opponents see the threat of war as a U.S. advantage.

These tools—diplomacy and military force—are always in the kit of policymakers. Diplomacy is the classic approach to finding working and durable solutions to conflicts, and the administration is presenting this deal in that ancient and honorable tradition. Skeptics of diplomacy often characterize it, however, not as a process but a product. That is, it can be a time-buying or propaganda device to avoid compromise and not a true path toward resolution of a conflict. Military force can be the threat that backs up diplomatic proposals, or it can deter reneging on diplomatic agreements. Often, however, resort to military action or war is defended as the most decisive means to conclude a dispute on terms favorable to the more powerful side. The Joint Chiefs of Staff current joint operations guidance affirms this view as the rationale for maintenance of America's massive military establishment.

The choice between war and diplomacy has been manifest over the past decade in the contrasts between the Bush and Obama administrations. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush and his security team dismissed patience and compromise as effete and rushed to warfare, which they labeled preemptive or preventive, without trying any form of diplomacy—be it bilateral approaches, coalition building, or international organizations. After the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan became quagmires with mounting

costs and frustrations, the national political climate began to favor diplomatic approaches again, and Barack Obama set out to build international cooperation and alliances. That direction has also been difficult to sustain, but the choice between diplomacy and war remains ever present in the nation's foreign policy deliberations.

Historians readily acknowledge that the past does not provide a precise guide for current decisions, but they contend that knowledge of the past has value in warning against expecting consistent behavior. They advise policymakers to be prepared for unforeseen and unmanageable consequences. Counterfactuals are problematic for historians, who like to study what happened in the past as a result of actual decisions, instead of what would have happened with different decisions. Policymakers, however, make choices all the time while trying to frame their decisions to account for what may result from one choice or another. In the Iran debate today, each side is offering its own prediction of what will happen, and neither knows for sure. The president's critics often seek to incite fear about the future, but commentators on this tactic point out historical examples in which fears used as debating points never materialized. Disastrous consequences did not attend the Sputnik launch, for example, or the missile gap, or even the growing economic power of Japan. Proponents of a diplomatic solution, including President Obama, have drawn comparisons between today's nuclear negotiations and successful arms talks with the Soviet Union—the dangerous Cold War enemy—conducted by every president from John F. Kennedy to Ronald Reagan.

Contemporary pundits and policymakers often draw upon World War II for historical examples. One of the hardest of the historical chestnuts is the Munich Conference of September 1938, and even today some see the Iranian supreme leader as a contemporary Adolph Hitler and the U.S. president as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. It is fairly obvious that Iran is not Nazi Germany. Iran is a regional, not a continental power; its conventional military capability is limited and it is surrounded on all sides by hostile neighbors. In addition, it is no longer evident to historians that Munich was simple appeasement. Chamberlain's decision may have been a defensible strategic effort to buy time, since Germany was ready for a fight in 1938 while Britain and its allies were not.

The extended U.S. negotiations with Japan in 1941 in the months before Pearl Harbor are a more useful World War II historical case study of diplomacy versus armed force. In that case, the United States abandoned diplomacy knowing, in part from intercepts of Japanese diplomatic communications, that the alternative to a deal was likely armed conflict involving two nations that possessed the most powerful strategic weapons of the day: battleships and aircraft carriers.

Diplomacy failed because both sides took doctrinaire positions. Secretary of State Hull was an ardent Wilsonian

who opposed aggression on principle and demanded respect for international law. Ambassador Nomura, aided by Ambassador Saburo Kuru, appealed to longstanding realist arguments in defense of the sovereign rights of nations to determine and defend their own interests. The United States insisted that Japan give up its aggression in East Asia, and Japan asserted that it had an undeniable right to determine its relationship with China and its neighbors with its own power and without interference.

In these bilateral talks, there was a third-party observer with its own existential interest in the U.S.-Japan confrontation: the Republic of China. Its president, Chiang Kai-shek, not only took every opportunity to remind Americans and their leaders of the close relationship between his government and the United States, but he appealed directly for greater U.S. military and material support to counter the threat posed to China by Japan. China had its own powerful lobby in the United States, backed by media mogul Henry Luce, and after the U.S. entry into the war, Chiang's charismatic English-speaking wife appeared before Congress to rally support. The similarities between Israel and China are evident in the recent appeals to the president and Congress by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and American organizations that support Israel.

Economic sanctions played a major role in 1941, as they have in 2015. Washington froze Japanese assets in the United States, placing strong pressure on Tokyo. Also, the outcome of U.S. talks with Japan involved the interests of other nations (the USSR, Britain, France, Holland, and China). In another parallel between then and now, the viability of international governance was at stake. Most affected before World War II were the League of Nations and various international conventions; in 2015 it was the European Union, the United Nations, and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In the months before Pearl Harbor, the domestic politics of both sides were central to the debate over diplomacy and force. U.S. leaders wanted to avoid resorting to military action because isolationism remained a popular sentiment, even though it was waning. Americans had a strong sense of justice; they opposed aggression and identified with friends like Britain and China that were under attack. For its part, Japan had patriotic moderates who did not want war, but it also had extremists who glorified the heroic use of force in defense of the nation and its culture. Citing ancient samurai ideals, these radicals characterized Japan as sacred and its enemies as weak and degenerate.

Like Secretary of State John Kerry, who engaged in lengthy negotiations with Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Secretary Hull conducted weeks of discussions with Ambassador Nomura, during which potential compromises emerged. In contrast to 2015, nothing was signed in 1941, but the diplomats arrived at documents in the negotiating rooms that could have constituted an agreement. The last *modus vivendi* on the table was an offer from Japan to pull back in Indochina and make some reassurances about limiting its commitments to the Axis powers in return for U.S. restoration of trade with Japan. Tokyo continued to refuse to withdraw forces from China. Not yet prepared for war and concerned about Europe, the U.S. side could have accepted something along these lines as a tactical step, if not a settlement.

Just as the 2015 negotiations were focused on nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and Iran's intentions to build a bomb, any agreement reached in 1941 would have been narrowly confined to one issue: Japan's military offensive on the Asian mainland. A deal on that key point would have avoided a U.S.-Japan clash in the short run but likely would have left unresolved the problem of Japan's alliance with Germany and Italy and even the future of Manchukuo, the Japanese puppet state in Manchuria militarily occupied in 1931 and recognized only by Tokyo as independent of

China. There is a parallel in the differences between the United States and Iran over Iran's relations with violent radical groups throughout the Middle East. Both the 1941 and the 2015 negotiations avoided some significant topics.

In 1941, the Roosevelt administration refused to accept the final *modus vivendi* that could have pulled the two nations back from the brink of war. Washington held to a Wilsonian condemnation of aggression and was bolstered by wishful thinking among the public and some members of Congress that the United States, through its geographic distance from Asia, its own resources, and its righteousness, could avoid fighting or compromising. Accepting the final diplomatic compromise would have left many—perhaps even most—issues unresolved, but it would have provided goodwill and some time for cooler heads to prevail. Instead, Japan attacked the U.S. fleet by surprise—perhaps the equivalent of Iran proceeding with weapons development unilaterally today—and President Roosevelt and Congress responded with a declaration of war. The massive and costly Pacific War ensued. It was a historical aberration, sandwiched between two eras of peaceful commerce and diplomacy between the two nations.

It could be argued that the Pacific War was costly but that in the end American principles and power prevailed. Such self-congratulation begs the question, however, as it assumes that victory was worth the cost and that no other less costly options were worth following.

In the case of Nazi Germany, it can be argued that no amount of diplomacy would have deterred Hitler; he believed his enemies were weak and pitiful and not to be feared. Some today would have us believe that the ayatollahs in Iran are similarly out of touch with reality and stoppable only by force. There is, however, considerable evidence that the Iranian leadership and particularly the Iranian people are not monolithic or irrational. The historical model may well be closer to 1930s Japan. A Japanese extremist faction gained ascendance, at times by assassinating democratically chosen prime ministers. In making the assumption that these extremists were the real Japan, not only did the Americans give force preference over negotiation in dealing with them, but U.S. reaction to Japan strengthened the hand of the militants and weakened the moderates inside the country. War became in some sense a self-fulfilling prophecy. Would a rejection of diplomacy today resemble that scenario? The militants in Japan did not want a compromise. They made themselves so frightening that they got well-meaning Americans, who stuck to their own principles, to give them the war they wanted and believed they could win.

Ironically, the war that the negotiators had labored to avoid led to the only military use of nuclear weapons to date. Ever since, and particularly in the context of the current debate, the world has lived with the destabilizing and destructive danger of nuclear war. The big and unknowable counterfactual is what if Washington and Tokyo had chosen diplomacy over war in 1941? A war between the two nations might have occurred eventually, but the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor would probably not have happened when and how it did. Could war in the Pacific have been avoided entirely—and could we have thus also avoided the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? The use of nuclear weapons as a foreign policy tool was no longer unthinkable after those bombings. If their use had remained unthinkable, would the world be where it is today, struggling with nonproliferation?

The historical record cannot tell us what would have happened with an alternate outcome in 1941, but historical perspective on the failure to stick with diplomacy does provide a clear warning of what can happen when compromise is abandoned and trust is placed in coercion.