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# Fall-Back Ambitions

What happens if Bill Clinton gets his way and America's friends stop buying Iranian oil? NBC's ever alert Andrea Mitchell asked a U.S. official that question after the president announced new trade sanctions on Iran. Wouldn't a successful international embargo against the ayatollahs disrupt supplies, Mitchell continued, causing gasoline prices and inflation to spike upward? Wouldn't you have created your own nightmare?

Tough questions, I thought enviously, expecting the Clinton aide to duck. But his answer came back candid. It went this way: No doubt. But there is little need to worry. The Europeans and Japanese are unlikely to boycott Iranian oil or stay out of the lucrative Iranian market. We have fall-back ambitions.

Back to those ambitions in a moment. The answer first of all points up the essential problem—and the long-shot hope—that Clinton creates for himself by banning U.S. trade with Iran and asking Europe and Japan to reverse their publicly stated opposition to that course.

An American president risks undermining his global authority by making demands that he knows will not be met. The president will look weak if he does not prevail in a campaign he has labeled vital. "I would have never recommended this to George Bush," an adviser to that ex-president says.

Why run that risk? The answer in part is that Clinton is playing defense on Iran—and most other foreign policy questions now. He declares economic war on the ayatollahs, twists Boris Yeltsin's arm on nuclear reactor sales to Iran and keeps on squeezing Cuba economically to deflect even more draconian measures the Republican congressional majorities threaten.

Clinton works to demonstrate that he has done everything he can short of the disruptive measures the Republicans propose. GOP leaders say they would cut off all aid to Russia over the Iran nuclear issue and close off U.S. trade to foreign companies that deal with Fidel Castro or with the ayatollahs.

These extreme GOP-sponsored measures would make a shambles of allied unity, already perturbed by the mercantilist edges of Clinton's foreign

policy, and would destroy serious U.S.-Russian cooperation. An all-out confrontation between Congress and the White House over Iran, Russia and Cuba, as threatened by Sens. Alfonse D'Amato and Jesse Helms, would paralyze U.S. foreign policy and harm American business interests abroad.

The elements of a foreign policy disaster are in place. But on Iran at least the elements of a bipartisan foreign policy success that reinforces American leadership abroad are also evident. Achieving that success depends on cooperation between the Republicans, who need to scale down objectives and rhetoric, and Clinton, who needs the cooperation of the allies and of Yeltsin to deliver his part of the deal.

The administration does not seriously

expect the Europeans and Japanese to stop buying Iran's oil, which now sells for a 20 percent or more discount on the OPEC target price of \$21 per barrel. Iran's exports have averaged 2.5 million barrels a day in recent months.

Instead the State Department hopes to be more effective in pressuring the allies to cut off loans and credits for the Iranians, halt the sale of goods that have military uses and restrict diplomatic contacts as long as Tehran pursues international terrorism and its quest for a nuclear weapon.

The administration had to force U.S. companies out of dealing with Iran if it was to pursue a tough approach with the allies. Clinton's hand is also strengthened by the Republican threats of even harsher measures to come—as long as those threats do not take on a life of their own and become divorced from Clinton's diplomatic squeeze strategy.

The menace of a cut-off of U.S. aid to Russia has also been useful to Clinton in prodding Yeltsin to show the United States that he will not permit Iran to use Russian nuclear technology to develop nuclear weapons.

The possibility of a way out on Iran was hinted at last Sunday by none other than House Speaker Newt Gingrich, whose constructive behind-the-scenes work on U.S.-Russian relations wins high praise from senior administration officials. In a television interview, Gingrich warned the Russians that "the idea they're going to sell a nuclear reactor without adequate safeguards to Iran is totally intolerable."

The headlines went to Gingrich's blast at the Russians. But his use of the qualifying words "without adequate safeguards" was more significant. It suggested that there might be conditions under which the Russian sale of the light-water reactors could eventually proceed if the world can be guaranteed there would be no enrichment or reprocessing of the uranium used in the reactors—as the United States guarantees in the case of the reactors it has promised North Korea.

The Gingrich qualification is worth pursuing. Clinton moved Yeltsin in that direction at the Moscow summit yesterday by getting the Russians to renounce publicly plans to provide enrichment technology to Tehran. Yeltsin will need to accept and announce more restrictions before the United States can be comfortable. But he has made a start.

The point in avoiding confrontation with the allies and Russia over Iran is not to be reasonable with Iran's rogue regime, which deals in organized murder and does seek nuclear weapons. The point is to be effective in containing that regime. International cooperation rather than fighting among friends is the key to isolating Iran.