

The Peril of Engaging Rogue States: An Interview with Dr. Michael Rubin

by Jerry Gordon (March 2014)

Michael Rubin, former Bush era Pentagon official who is currently a Resident Scholar at the Washington, DC –based American Enterprise Institute (AEI), has been engaged in intense media interviews since the launch of his new book, [*Dancing with the Devil: The Perils of Engaging Rogue Regimes*](#), which covers Rubin’s research on fifty years of US and Western experience with rogue regimes and terrorist groups. The Encounter Books press release on the publication of Rubin’s book noted:

The American response of first [resort](#) is to talk with such rogues, on the theory that, “It never hurts to talk to enemies.” Seldom is conventional wisdom so wrong. It is true that sanctions and military force come at high costs. However, case studies examining the [history](#) of American diplomacy with North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, the Taliban’s Afghanistan, and Pakistan demonstrate that problems with both strategies do not make engagement with rogue regimes a cost-free option. Rogue regimes have one thing in common—they pretend to be aggrieved in order to put Western diplomats on the defensive. Whether they are in Pyongyang, Tehran, or Islamabad, rogue leaders understand that the West [rewards](#) bluster with incentives. The State Department, the process of holding talks is often deemed more important than results.

We met Rubin in 2005 when he returned to Yale to discuss his experience as a former Pentagon official on Iran and Iraq who also served as a political advisor to the Provisional Coalition Authority. He spoke about the emergence of the nuclear Iran threat under the “reformist” regime in Tehran led by Ayatollah Khatami. See Rubin’s background and blog at the AEI website, [here](#) and [here](#). Our interview with Rubin ranged across an array of prevailing issues. Among these are the Iranian nuclear and ICBM threat and Putin’s great game of one sided politics in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. He also addresses Pakistan’s tolerance of terrorism and the lack of US support for the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria. He criticizes the folly of the Administration’s support of Turkey under Premier Erdogan and the folly of its lead in the Final Status negotiations with the Palestinians imperiling Israel’s security.



Dr. Michael Rubin, Resident Scholar at The American Enterprise Institute

Here are some of his observations.

Over the period from 2000 to 2005, the EU's pursuit of engagement with Iran under President Khatami enabled the Islamic Republic to devote 70 percent of its hard currency reserves to both ICBM and nuclear weapons development. Moreover Rubin's research on that period revealed that Iran took the lead from North Korea in its negotiating posture with the West alternating bluster with soothing words about the dialogue of civilizations. That raises the question of whether the present P5+1 negotiations backed by the US Administration with another reformist, President Rouhani, might be what baseball legend Yogi Berra called "déjà vu all over again"? Rouhani was Iran's nuclear negotiator under former President Khatami. On Putin's great game strategy in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, in the midst of the crisis in the Ukraine, Rubin had the following observations. The Administration's current negotiations posture with the Russian President is the equivalent of "Chamberlain negotiating with Machiavelli, and Machiavelli always wins." Rubin believes that Putin is "playing a zero sum game" in both the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Based on recent speeches by an Iranian Revolutionary Guards leader, Iran believes itself the head of the Islamic world. The Administration's outreach to Islamist non-state actors like the Muslim Brotherhood he considers a catastrophe reflected in recent conversations with senior leaders in Kuwait and the UAE. Rubin believes that the Administration has made a mistake not supporting secular Kurdish regimes in the Iraqi regional government and the virtual autonomous Kurdish region in the Northeastern province of Hazaka in Syria. He believes this stems from our support of Turkey under the Erdogan government. Rubin suggests that Turkey's embattled Premier Erdogan may be creating another rogue regime in Ankara.

Against this background we reached out to Dr. Rubin for this interview.

Jerry Gordon: Michael Rubin thank you for consenting to this timely interview

Michael Rubin: Thank you for inviting me.

Gordon: Your new book is entitled *Dancing with the Devil: The Perils of Engaging Rogue Regimes*. What is a rogue regime and who are they?

Rubin: Initially, policymakers defined rogue regimes sort of like Justice Potter Stewart defined pornography: They knew it when they saw it. The Clinton administration, however, defined rogues as regimes immune to traditional deterrence, unwilling to abide by the normal

rules of diplomacy, often controlled by unrepresentative cliques, and dabbling in terrorism and/or proliferation. The biggest rogues today would be North Korea and Iran, although Pakistan could certainly fit the bill given the influence and actions of their intelligence service. But, my study also considered Iraq under Saddam, Libya under Gaddafi, the Taliban, the PLO before Oslo, as well as the history of U.S. dialogue with other terrorist groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Gordon: What should be the appropriate strategies for the US and coalition partners contending with rogue regimes?

Rubin: There is no magic formula, but it's important to recognize that contrary to the belief of many diplomats, talking can be a very costly strategy. Talking alone never works. Of the few examples where diplomacy has worked, it has done so after years spent trying to set the right circumstances. Diplomacy in many ways should be the end of a process, not the beginning.

Gordon: What is wrong with current US strategies towards Iran and North Korea over their nuclear programs?

Rubin: The book documents how Iranian negotiators look at North Korea as the model to emulate in negotiations, and not a state to condemn. And why shouldn't they? Almost all the progress North Korea has made has been as the result of gains it made or delays it achieved at the negotiating table. We shouldn't reward bluster or incentivize bad behavior. We shouldn't be afraid to walk away from the table. Leverage should never be a dirty word.

Gordon: Can you cite examples where US strategies have worked?

Rubin: Gaddafi's 2003 forfeiture of his secret nuclear program is the main example. In subsequent interviews, he spoke about his concern with regard to American resolve to use the military should diplomacy fail. The seizure of a ship carrying contraband to Libya—an episode I detail in the book—also convinced him that American intelligence was omniscient enough that he could not simply lie.

Gordon: Iran and North Korea are cooperating in the development of ICBMs that Western intelligence suggests might be achievable by mid decade. In your view how should that threat be countered?

Rubin: Let me put it this way: Giving between \$7 billion and \$20 billion in sanctions relief isn't the way to go, as Obama did with Iran. Nor is removing North Korea from the state sponsor of terrorism list (as Condoleezza Rice pushed through in the waning days of the Bush

administration) wise. The United States has not convinced any ally that this is a priority. To make it a priority, would require sanctions, a willingness to intercept tests, and a policy to make the sponsors of North Korea and Iran nervous. Encouraging Japan to develop its own nuclear deterrent more openly would certainly catch China's attention and might convince Beijing that its sponsorship of Pyongyang isn't any more worth the risk.

Gordon: What should American policy be towards Pakistan with its nuclear arsenal given a credible Taliban threat to the current government?

Rubin: Suffice to say, playing footsie with Pakistan has a track-record of failure, and billions of dollars in aid have done nothing but spark greater anti-Americanism. Ultimately, we have to recognize that Pakistan is a rogue state. Because of the independence of its intelligence service, the ISI. It doesn't abide by the rules of diplomacy and it does support terrorism. The Taliban is a problem of Pakistan's making. The nuclear arsenal poses a real problem, but perhaps the lesson should be not to let terror-sponsoring states like Pakistan get so far in the first place. Now in a situation like this instead of offering Pakistan incentives for good behavior perhaps a little more coercion may be required. Instead of offering military equipment to Pakistan, we might suggest that if you continue on this path we might offer India drones and JDAMs.

Gordon: Is Iran's strategy effectively threatening hegemony in the Middle East region?

Rubin: Yes. Iran sees itself as the leader of the Islamic world. The deputy commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps recently gave a speech about this. About how Iran is the only country in the Islamic world willing to stand up and support resistance movements and address secular regimes in the area. That means it is the only one willing to conduct terrorism on a large scale. Unfortunately that means that Iran is not a status quo power, it is an ideological power. One of the problems that the US foreign policy has is we want to look at all disputes in terms of grievance. That if you look at all disputes in terms of grievance then if you address the grievances then disputes go away. In Iran's case, we are facing an ideology and that ideology is not going to compromise.

Gordon: How dangerous to American interests is Russian President Putin's great game strategy in the Middle East?

Rubin: Very. The problem is that Americans tend to see diplomacy as a means to compromise, a win-win solution. However, Putin sees international relations as a zero-sum game in which for Russia to win, everyone else must lose. When Neville Chamberlain goes up against Machiavelli, Machiavelli wins.

Gordon: Do you believe the Administration's global strategy of engagement can deter or contain the ambitions of rogue regimes?

Rubin: More than five years into Obama's presidency, evidence clearly shows that his strategy has failed. That said, the failure of engagement with rogue regimes is not only limited to Obama but has also occurred under his predecessors, both Republican and Democrat. Remember Ronald Reagan's outreach to Saddam Hussein?

Gordon: Has the Administration's outreach to Islamist non-state actors in the Muslim world failed?

Rubin: It has more than failed, because it has undercut American relations with traditional allies across the Arab world who recognize the dangers posed by groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.

Gordon: How secure is Israel, America's ally in the region, while the Administration pursues a Final Status agreement with the Palestinians?

Rubin: Egyptian President Anwar Sadat decided to make peace with Israel only after trying to eradicate the Jewish state militarily and failing. The problem with the Palestinians today is that while they will try to win concessions at the negotiating table, they still believe they might achieve through war or terrorism what they cannot win with compromise. To seek Israeli concessions before the Palestinians eschew violence and terrorism entirely will only encourage more violence.

Gordon: How applicable in development of strategies is the maxim by the Roman Vegetius: *Si Vis pacem, para bellum*, "if you seek peace prepare for war"?

Rubin: Very. The gap between the rhetoric of the White House and the reality of its policy undercuts credibility and actually increases the chance for conflict as rogue regimes grow overconfident.

Gordon: Dr. Rubin thank you for this engrossing discussion about your book *Dancing with the Devil*. Perhaps we might consider this as Part I and on the next opportunity delve into your views on the Kurds and the turmoil in Turkey under Premier Erdogan.

Rubin: I would welcome that opportunity, thank you.

Listen to senior editor Jerry Gordon's interview with Michael Rubin, [here](#).

Also see Jerry Gordon's collection of interviews,