

# Opinion

The New York Times

## EDITORIAL

# How International Agreements Work



DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Two years ago, the Trump administration withdrew from an international agreement that had lifted most sanctions on Iran in exchange for strict limits on Iran's nuclear program. President Trump called the accord, which had been painstakingly negotiated by the Obama administration and America's closest European allies, the "worst deal ever."

He has been trying to kill it ever since. He reimposed

sanctions because a descriptive section of the U.N. Security Council Resolution that followed the accord lists the names of the countries that struck the deal, including the United States. That argument does not hold water.

"It's a matter of simple logic that if you are a participating state, you have to be participating," said Larry Johnson, former assistant secretary general for legal affairs at the United Nations.

Even Iran hawks, like John Bolton, find this argument so disingenuous as to be counterproductive. "It's too cute by half to say we're in the nuclear deal for purposes we want but not for those we don't," Mr. Bolton wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Preventing the sale of sophisticated weaponry to Iran is a laudable goal, given the military support that Iran provides to various violent nonstate actors in its region. But for nearly two decades, world powers have agreed to focus on the bigger prize: preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Snapback sanctions could put the final nail in the coffin of an agreement that does just that, at least until 2030.

Moreover, the United States left the agreement in 2018. No amount of legalistic contortions can change that simple fact. The United States has no standing to invoke a cherry-picked provision that serves its own agenda while it makes a mockery of the rest of the agreement. That's not how international agreements work. The Trump administration's behavior erodes the integrity of every international accord going forward.

That's why there is so little support on the 15-member Security Council for the U.S. position. In a related vote in August, only the Dominican Republic stood with the United States. Nonetheless, U.S. diplomats are pushing ahead. They contend that global sanctions snapped back after a 30-day notification period, which ended Sunday. President Trump is expected to address the General Assembly virtually on Tuesday and declare his intention to enforce U.N. Security

Council sanctions on Iran.

U.N. officials now find themselves in a diplomatic twilight zone, stuck between the Trump administration's view of reality and that of the world where nearly everyone else resides.

It is not clear what will happen next. Global sanctions normally require a committee to monitor them. But a committee

is not clear what will happen next. Global sanctions normally require a committee to monitor them. But a committee

invoked snapback will kill the nuclear deal, which the other parties have been trying desperately to keep alive. Iran had been widely seen as keeping its commitments under the deal until the U.S. exit. Afterward, it increased its production of fissile material, as a calibrated response to the American withdrawal.

Now, the agreement is in tatters. If Mr. Trump is re-elected, the chances of reviving the accord are slim to none. Iran could walk away from the nuclear deal altogether and resume its previous levels of production of fissile material, which it claims will be used as fuel for a peaceful nuclear reactor. This will set Iran back on a collision course with the United States and Israel.

The deal could still get back on track. Iran's actions are not irreversible. The fissile material it has produced could still be secured and sent out of the country. There's also a chance that behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts might lead to informal agreements to refrain from significant arms sales to Iran that would inflame the situation. The arms embargo does not actually expire until October, so there is still time for diplomacy to work.

The Iranian people are undoubtedly suffering from the U.S. sanctions, all the more so during the pandemic, which has left them short of medicines. But the regime has not come begging for a deal with Mr. Trump. In fact, the Trump administration's policies have made fools of the moderates in Iran, who argued that the United States could be trusted to keep its end of the bargain.

Like so much of Mr. Trump's gamesmanship, there's no Plan B behind the bluster. Today, Iran is closer to having enough fissile material to build a nuclear bomb than it was when he took office.

## LETTERS

## The G.O.P. Push for a Quick Confirmation

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Adversaries Gird as Battle Brews Over Court Seat" (front page, Sept. 21):

President Trump may think his move to fill Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat signals his strength and reinforces his appeal to evangelicals. Actually, though, it reveals his fear that he won't be re-elected. If you're confident of winning, why rush the process?

And Mr. Trump the transactionalist should realize that once the evangelicals get their Supreme Court justice, they may abandon their thrice-married, pay-off-the-porn-star president. Watch out!

WILLIAM HOELZEL  
WEATOGUE, CONN.

TO THE EDITOR:

Democrats are howling that it would be immoral to name a new Supreme Court justice before the election. Is there anyone who doesn't believe that if the roles were reversed, the Democrats would be doing the same thing?

MICHAEL QUANE  
SOUTH HEMPSTEAD, N.Y.

TO THE EDITOR:

In the unseemly political fight already underway over the vacant seat, there is an important consideration regarding the composition of the Supreme Court that should not be overlooked.

Of the eight justices currently on

cally outlaws such a procedure?

ARNOLD J. CLIFT  
SAXTONS RIVER, VT.

TO THE EDITOR:

"Abortion is not the only sin." These are the recent words of my 93-year-old Catholic mother, who raised 12 children in near poverty rather than defy the church's teachings on birth control. She has often voted on an anti-abortion basis, but recent times have refocused her on the other precepts of her faith.

It is also a sin to destroy the Earth, reject anguished immigrants, mistreat our Black and brown neighbors, deny access to health care, reward the greedy and ignore the poor. A firmly right-wing court will permit if not encourage all of these other sins.

JUDITH NEUMANN  
AUBURNDALE, MASS.

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Can Mitch McConnell Be Stopped?" (column, nytimes.com, Sept. 19):

Michelle Goldberg is misguided in trying to impede efforts to nominate and confirm a new justice for the Supreme Court. Democrats should focus all our efforts on winning the White House and the Senate, rather than divert efforts to fight the Supreme Court nomination. If we succeed in winning the elections, we will be able to correct

## When F. Murray Abraham Met Justice Ginsburg

TO THE EDITOR:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg and I shared a gondola in Venice during the 500th anniversary of the Ghetto in 2016. I was filming the "Merchant of Venice" segment of the PBS "Shakespeare Uncovered" series, and when her boat broke down, I invited her to share mine.

She stood no higher than my shoulder, which startled me, and even now in my memory, our first meeting is one of surprise, because her quiet, assured stillness projected something much bigger and stopped me cold. I imagine it affected everyone the same way; it was calming. Her bodyguard was just about twice her size, and my sense of him was that he was so proud to be her protector.

She and I sat next to each other in the ride to her hotel, and I invited her to act with me in the trial scene from "The Merchant of Venice"; I'd been scheduled to appear in a mock-trial appeal of Shylock's verdict. She instantly agreed, and it's on tape somewhere.

After we did the Shakespeare scene, there was an imaginary argument of Shylock's appeal between real-life international lawyers and scholars, with Ruth as chief justice. They then retired to chambers for half an hour, and when they returned, Chief Justice

Ginsburg found for Shylock on several grounds, one of which was that counsel for the defense, Portia, did not have a license to practice law, but also that Shylock, if he had known of the deadly consequences of his actions, would have never insisted on the pound of flesh.

Further, if he had been aware and still insisted, then he was obviously mentally incompetent, therefore not responsible for his actions.

The simplicity, the logic, the clarity of her decision revealed the woman herself, her grace, her intellect and, most of all, her humanity. And now, of our great loss.

F. MURRAY ABRAHAM, NEW YORK

## Those Blue States

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Even in Crisis, President Sees Red vs. Blue" (front page, news analysis, Sept. 18):

So apparently our president thinks that the coronavirus death toll is not so bad "if you take the blue states out."

This leads me to conclude that I now know for sure who is going to win the coming election: Trump!

If you take the blue states out.

VICKI RIBA KOESTLER  
ALEXANDRIA, VA.