

Churchill's famous aphorism that it's better to jaw-jaw than to war-war has never been more apposite or timely. Although the usual suspects are queueing up to criticise the agreement between Iran and various "world powers", as far as international diplomacy goes, this is as good as it is likely to get.

This doesn't mean that we have to assume that a final deal will either be easily agreed or even hold. Sadly, it is all too possible that neither of these outcomes is assured. But it is worth thinking about the alternatives and the possible benefits if an agreement can be made to work – especially at a time when there are few grounds for optimism about either the prospects for global peace or our leaders' ability to secure it.

Perhaps the biggest possible benefit to be derived from any diplomatically negotiated agreement at the moment is that it might actually encourage us to believe that diplomacy can still work. Agreement between the most unlikely of partners might not only be seen to be possible, but could potentially deliver outcomes that are inherently desirable.

Who could object to a negotiated agreement that effectively assured that one of the most important and potentially powerful states in the Middle East actually gave up trying to achieve a nuclear weapons capability?

Importantly, it would not just be Iran that was effectively "socialised" into "good behaviour" in such circumstances. The possible impact on the other countries involved in this enterprise is worth considering, too. Russia and China have been key partners in the negotiations potentially giving the agreement a credibility and legitimacy that extends beyond the usual group of Western powers.

At the very least this will go some way toward assuring Russia and China that their claims to be taken seriously as "responsible stakeholders" in international diplomacy not only have substance, but may provide a future template for resolving some of the many other crises that currently populate the landscape of international politics.

Both Russia and China have their own problems and reasons to be concerned about the

efficacy and impact of multilateral diplomacy. A success story like this may go some way to assuaging them and building confidence.

Israel's response in the shape of Benjamin Netanyahu is depressingly predictable. While there are no doubt good reasons for Israel to be concerned about the emergence of Iran as a major power within the Middle East – with or without nuclear weapons – it is worth asking what the alternative to some sort of negotiated agreement actually is.

One possibility – which still cannot be discounted – is unilateral action on Israel's part. A number of commentators in Israel have been reminding anyone that cares to listen that it has the capacity to respond to what it sees as an existential threat in whatever way it sees fit.

That Israel is a nuclear armed state means that it can reduce Iran to rubble if it chooses to do so. It's not hard to see why Iran might be nervous about this reality. How would we feel if – say – a nuclear armed Indonesia threatened to use any means to stop us achieving parity?

Even if we put to one side the question of the impact of such actions on the political stability of a Middle East region already up to its knees in blood and gore, there's the small matter of what it might do to the "international investment community". Global financial markets go into a tizz at the drop of the most inconsequential geopolitical hat. What might a full blown war in the Middle East do?

That Israel is not also part of, or bound by, this agreement is both telling and unfortunate. Iran is still considered to be at the "roguish" end of the good-bad state continuum. Israel, by contrast, is a key unequivocally supported ally of the United States and by extension Australia.

Iran might reasonably ask why such double standards apply and why Israel was allowed to develop potentially threatening nuclear weapons with a nod and a wink from the West.

Whatever we may think about the appropriateness or otherwise of the different treatment meted out to allies and possible foes, one thing is abundantly clear: sanctions work and can change the behaviour of states. Iran has been brought to the bargaining table in large part because its

economy was being crippled by highly effective measures that have undermined its economy and ratcheted up domestic political pressure on an autocratic regime.

One might reasonably ask why, if the US can produce such an effective and welcome response from Iran, the same logic isn't applied to Israel?

While there is little prospect of such even-handedness actually occurring in the US's treatment of states in the Middle East, such actions might not only help to resolve the seemingly intractable "Palestinian problem" by unambiguously putting the "two-state solution" back on the table, but they might also do wonders for the standing and legitimacy of American policy in a region where it has few friends.

No doubt this sounds rather fanciful and at odds with the grim reality of Middle Eastern politics. But if peace is ever to be achieved, much less sustained, it will either be as a consequence of a negotiated political settlement or because of the piles of corpses on each side became too high to continue the struggle. Let's try the first before we go back to business as usual.

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