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**Brussels Sprouts**  
by Thomas L. Friedman

In his book "The Ideas That Conquered the World," Michael Mandelbaum tells a story about a young girl who is eating dinner at a friend's house and her friend's mother asks her if she likes brussels sprouts. "Yes, of course," the girl says. "I like brussels sprouts." After dinner, though, the mother notices that the girl hasn't eaten a single sprout. "I thought you liked brussels sprouts," the mother said. "I do," answered the girl, "but not enough to actually eat them."

Mr. Mandelbaum, who teaches foreign policy at Johns Hopkins, related that story to me during a conversation about the two greatest nuclear proliferation threats we face today: North Korea and Iran. Readers of this column know that I rarely write about nuclear proliferation. It is not because I am not interested. I am. It is not because I think it isn't a grave danger. It is. The reason I don't write about it much is because the solution is so ridiculously obvious there isn't much to say. Here's what I mean: North Korea's nuclear program could be stopped tomorrow by the country that provides roughly half of North Korea's energy and one-third of its food supplies - and that is China.

All China has to say to Kim Jong Il is: "You will shut down your nuclear weapons program and put all your reactors under international inspection, or we will turn off your lights, cut off your heat and put your whole country on a diet. Have we made ourselves clear?" One thing we know about China - it knows how to play hardball when it wants to, and if China played hardball that way with North Korea, the proliferation threat from Pyongyang would be over. Ditto Europe vis-à-vis Iran. If the European Union said to the Iranians: "You will shut down your nuclear weapons program and put all your reactors and related facilities under international inspection or you will face a total economic boycott from Europe. Which part of this sentence don't you understand?"

Trust me, that is the kind of explicit threat that would get Tehran's attention. Short of that, the Iranians will dicker over their nuclear carpets forever.

So why haven't China and the E.U. said these things? "Like that girl with the brussels sprouts," Mr. Mandelbaum said, "the Chinese and the Europeans are all for combating nuclear proliferation - just not enough actually to do something about it."

At the end of the day, the Chinese would rather live with a nuclear North Korea than risk a collapsed nonnuclear North Korea, and the Europeans would rather live with a nuclear Iran - that Europe can make all kinds of money off of - rather than risk losing Iran's business to prevent it from going nuclear. The Chinese and the Europeans "each assume that in the end, the U.S. will deter both the North Koreans and the Iranians anyway, so why worry," Mr. Mandelbaum said.

Are the Europeans and Chinese behaving cynically? Of course, these are the very countries constantly complaining about U.S. "hegemony," and calling for a "multipolar world." Yet the only thing they are really interested in being a pole for is to oppose the U.S. - not to actually do something hard themselves to stabilize the global system.

The prevailing assumption in Washington is that if something really big is going wrong - like North Korea and Iran going nuclear - it must be because America messed up. Yes, the Bush nonproliferation policy has been pretty dysfunctional, but the real problem is that those parties with the leverage to make a diplomatic difference refuse to use it. (We have already largely isolated Iran and North Korea. There is nothing much more America can threaten, short of using force.)

This is not a joke. If North Korea and Iran both go nuclear, that step may trigger a major realignment of geopolitics - the likes of which has not been seen since the end of the cold war. If North Korea sets off a nuclear test, how long will Japan continue relying on the U.S. for its nuclear shield? And what will South Korea and Taiwan do? And if Japan or South Korea goes nuclear, how may an anxious China react? And if Shiite Iran becomes a nuclear power - in tandem with Iraq's being run by Shiites - the Sunni Arab world will go nuts, not to mention the Israelis. Will Saudi Arabia then feel compelled to acquire a nuclear deterrent? Will Egypt?

We're talking nuclear dominoes.

So there you have it - my annual nonproliferation column. Unless China and Europe get serious about the problem, it's not going to get fixed. And for now, neither one seems to be ready or willing to eat its brussels sprouts.

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