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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, center, President Shimon Peres, right, and Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon attended a ceremony last month in Jerusalem.

The collapse of Secretary of State John Kerry's effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has provoked much handwringing. A recurring theme is this: Given that the deal's basic terms are known to all, why can't the parties involved just sign and have done with it? After all, the endgame is clear: Two states living side-by-side, Israel withdrawing more or less to its pre-1967 borders, Palestinians accepting compensation in lieu of an actual "right of return," and some sort of creative arrangement for sharing Jerusalem. Let's stop the bickering and get on with it.

The problem with this analysis is that it implicitly treats peace as an agreement between equals. That definition might pertain to relations between Norway and Sweden. But it does that not describe relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

In politics, power determines outcomes, but power is always relative. Between Israelis and Palestinians, the disparity of power looms large and not by accident. Even before founding their state, Zionists were intent on acquiring a surplus of power. By means both fair and foul, Israel succeeded in doing just that. Today it has a regionally dominant conventional army; nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them; and the world's leading superpower in its pocket. By comparison, the Palestinians can claim no remotely comparable advantage.

So when it comes to relative power, Israel enjoys an immense edge, which the Israeli government has no intention of surrendering. For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the “peace process” is not a means to settle differences through compromise or give-and-take. It’s a mechanism to enshrine hard-earned Israeli advantages in perpetuity.

Several years ago, in outlining his own “vision of peace,” Netanyahu spelled out the implications of this approach. “If we get a guarantee of demilitarization,” he remarked, “we are ready to agree to a real peace agreement, a demilitarized Palestinian state side by side with the Jewish state.”

Note that Netanyahu does not say, “When the Palestinians disarm, we will follow suit.” In the eyes of most Israelis, doing so would constitute the height of folly. Similarly, to relinquish control over strategic terrain such as the West Bank or strategic resources such as water in return for assurances that by-gones will henceforth be by-gones will strike many Israelis as a dubious bargain.

Stripped to its essence, therefore, peace, as Israelis understand the term, is an agreement between supplicant and benefactor. It’s the condition that ensues when the weaker party meets the stronger party’s requirements. Peace implies submission. Given its superior power, why should Israel settle for less?

Fair? Of course not. But in international relations, fairness is like good sportsmanship in pro hockey. You might give it a nod during postgame interviews. On the ice, meanwhile, you do whatever you can get away with.

Viewed from this perspective, when Palestinians refuse to acquiesce in Israeli demands — protesting the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories or balking at a requirement to acknowledge Israel’s indelibly Jewish identity — they are willfully rejecting peace. Given that existing circumstances manifestly favor Israel, we may take with a grain of salt Israeli expressions of disappointment that peace should remain so elusive.

The United States has limited ability to break this deadlock. Although an interested third party, it cannot simply mandate peace. As a practical matter, Washington’s plausible policy options reduce to three.

The first, by far the easiest, is to perpetuate the never-ending charade of the “peace process.” This implies tacitly endorsing the pro-Israeli status quo while affirming Palestinian statelessness for the foreseeable future. Solving nothing, it also costs nothing, merely kicking the can down the road.

The second option, by far the most dangerous, is to persuade the weaker party to accede to the stronger party’s expectations. A Palestinian quasi-state designed with Israeli preferences uppermost in mind might yield a sort of peace, sullen but better than no peace at all.

But for the United States such an achievement will likely cost plenty. Any hint that Washington has forced Palestinians to knuckle under to Israel will further inflame anti-Americanism throughout the Islamic world. We have quite enough of that already.

The third option, by far the most difficult, is to peel away the advantages to which the stronger party has become accustomed. Reducing the disparity of power will level the playing field. Rendering the status quo less tenable might create incentives for meeting the other side halfway rather than issuing diktats or scoldings.

What makes this option so difficult is that the stronger party will not voluntarily relinquish its advantages. Just as obliging Palestinians to accept a made-in-Israel formula for a two-state solution would entail considerable nudging so too will obliging Israel to negotiate with the Palestinians as equals.

When it comes to nudging, the United States has several tools at hand. It can curb the flow of US military hardware and technology to Israel. It can cease to indulge double standards regarding weapons of mass destruction. It

can withhold diplomatic cover for Israeli actions inconsistent with US interests. None of these guarantee success. All entail risk. But together they might encourage Israeli leaders to rethink the consequences of continued inaction.

Although it may not be able to mandate peace, the United States can at least encourage the stronger partner to want it.

Which of these three options are our leaders in Washington most likely to choose? Count on them to take the easy way out.