

A messy compromise on Iran

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IN REACHING agreement among themselves to report Iran to the United Nations Security Council for failing to comply with previous resolutions of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the P-5 countries and Germany have let the Manmohan Singh Government off the hook. If there is consensus in the February 2-3 IAEA Board of Governors (BoG) meeting on a draft resolution reporting Iran, India — which has come under intense American pressure to condemn Iran, can simply go along. And even if Cuba, Venezuela, and one or more non-aligned countries refuse to support the resolution, the probable affirmative votes of Russia and China will likely provide the United Progressive Alliance Government with enough of a cushion to weather any domestic political criticism.

After Monday's meeting of Britain, China, Russia, France, Germany, and the United States, the numbers in favour of an affirmative vote in the 35-member BoG will be higher than what prevailed last September. Having facilitated that original vote — which found Iran in non-compliance with its safeguards obligations — India has reverted to being a minor player whose views matter little to the Iranians and even less to the P-5. In any event, now that the Big Five have decided on a certain course of action, there is precious little any country or group of countries can really do to stand in the way at this stage of the game at least.

Russia and China, which had hitherto been opposed to reporting Iran to the UNSC, have taken a pragmatic decision to step back. Their intention, presumably, is to fight another day, in a battleground where they can exercise their veto power.

In India, the debate over the Manmohan Singh Government's vote against Iran last September was so polarised that it was often forgotten that the stakes were much higher than merely the security of gas supplies or the fate of the civil nuclear cooperation agreement with the U.S. Today, what has to be grasped by everyone is that the U.S. is hell-bent on setting the stage for a military conflict with Iran. And that the course and outcome of such a conflict will have consequences even more disastrous for our region than the Iraq war so far.

The compromise struck in London on Monday only pushes back by a month the timetable by which this tragedy will be enacted. It has been decided that the Board of Governors will report Iran to the Security Council this week but the latter will not take up the matter for active consideration until after IAEA Director General Mohammed el-Baradei presents his latest report on Iran to the BoG in the first week of March. There is one last safety valve put in by Russia and China: They insisted, and the U.S. and its allies agreed, that the Security Council should also "await... any Resolution from the March meeting [of the IAEA Board], before deciding to take action to reinforce the authority of the IAEA process."

On paper at least, this means the Security Council will not act even in March without explicit authorisation from another IAEA resolution. It remains to be seen how this clause is incorporated into the draft resolution to be circulated to the IAEA Board on February 2.

Last September, the compromise reached with India and other countries was that while Iran would be held non-compliant, the timing of the Security Council report would be decided later. The compromise today is that while Iran will be reported, the timing of any Security Council action would be decided later.

U.S.' gameplan

Each time it appeases Washington's relentless pressure on Iran, the international community is being made to climb higher and higher up a ladder whose final rungs can only be sanctions and war. This is precisely the route the U.S. followed against Iraq in its quest to effect regime change there. Its war of attrition using sanctions, inspections, no-fly-zones, air strikes, and impossible ultimatums lasted 12 years before ending finally in an invasion that surprised no one.

In a candid speech to the Arms Control Association in Washington last week, Hans Blix, former head of the U.N. Monitoring and Verification Commission (UNMOVIC), repeated a charge he has made before that the U.S. was never really interested in weapons inspections in Iraq. "My belief is that if we had been allowed to continue to carry out inspections for a couple of months more, we would then have been able to go to all the sites which were given by intelligence, and since there weren't any weapons of mass destruction, we would have reported that there weren't any." However, even with such a report, David Ruppe of the Global Security Newswire quoted him as saying, war probably would not have been averted as "there was a certain momentum behind it."

Is there a lesson in all this for the world to learn as the Iran crisis slowly unfolds? Mr. Blix certainly thinks there is. "Today, I think I worry about the spin and momentum on Iran," he said. And well he might. The U.S. is not unaware that there exists a law passed by the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, demanding that Iran withdraw its temporary acceptance of the Additional Protocol [as soon as the IAEA refers its case to the Security Council](#). Iran is a highly politicised and polarised society and there is every likelihood that MPs will demand implementation of this resolution once the IAEA Board votes the way the U.S. wants it to. What would happen once Iran withdraws from the Additional Protocol, joining, in the process, the 106 countries who have yet to sign that document? IAEA inspectors would no longer be able to visit sites outside of those facilities that are already safeguarded.

If indeed Iran has built clandestine nuclear facilities — as Britain and the U.S. believe — there cannot be a worse outcome from the non-proliferation perspective than IAEA inspectors losing their 'go as you please' pass. However, in a perverse way, this is precisely what the Bush administration is hoping Iran will do. For once IAEA inspectors lose the special access they currently enjoy, this would allow the U.S. to seek yet another escalation — citing the urgency of regaining access.

Is there a way out of this impasse? There is, and that way consists of combining the continuation of inspections with the development of two compromise packages, one technical, the other economic. The first would seek to induce Iran to accept a version of Russia's offshore enrichment proposal that also fulfils Iran's rights as an NPT signatory. The second package would seek to provide Teheran guarantees against economic sanctions and

military threats. Regardless of what the IAEA Board decides this week, India must join hands with other countries to insist that the U.S. and its allies not go down the path of coercion and confrontation.

On its part, Iran to act tactfully and in a way that reassures its well-wishers in the international community about its intentions.

First, it should announce that the current round of uranium enrichment experiments it began on January 10 is coming to an end and will not be resumed for the moment. Second, it needs to do everything in its power in the coming month to help the IAEA inspectors close the file on the P-2 centrifuge and other minor outstanding matters. The Majlis resolution need not to be invoked this week, when the IAEA reports Iran to the UN SC, but in March, when the Security Council actually begins active consideration of its case. Finally, it should continue talking to Russia, China and other countries about the development of multinational fuel cycle facilities. Washington's principal aim is regime change, not non-proliferation. Let its bluff be called.

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