

Iran: Little chance of nuclear compromise

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Tehran will respond to the pending European package but is unlikely to suspend enrichment under pressure. What the world must realise is sanctions will take us further from and not closer to a peaceful solution.

IN 1983, some 20 years before Iran was accused by the United States and its allies of having a clandestine nuclear fuel enrichment programme, Tehran approached the International Atomic Energy Agency with a request for technical assistance in setting up a pilot plant for the production of uranium hexafluoride (UF₆).

UF₆ is the basic feedstock in the uranium enrichment process, in which the gas is spun through centrifuge machines in order to produce low enriched uranium for reactors — or highly enriched uranium for bombs. At the time, Iran was specifically interested in restarting work begun in the Shah's period on converting U₃O₈ into UO₂ pellets and then going on to set up a pilot facility for UF₆ production.

Since the IAEA Statute commits the agency to provide technical assistance to member states, a team of experts travelled to Iran to interact with scientists at Entec, the Iranian atomic establishment set up in 1974 with French assistance to work on the fuel cycle. According to an account provided by Mark Hibbs in *Nuclear Fuel*, one of the most authoritative newsletters of the international nuclear industry, the IAEA experts recommended that the agency assist Entec to help their scientists overcome their lack of practical experience. They also suggested that the IAEA provide expert services in a number of areas including the fuel cycle.

But the promised IAEA help never materialised. According to Mr. Hibbs: "Sources said that when in 1983 the recommendations of an IAEA mission to Iran were passed on to the IAEA's technical cooperation program, the U.S. government then 'directly intervened' to discourage the IAEA from assisting Iran in production of UO₂ and UF₆. 'We stopped that in its tracks,' said a former U.S. official." Rebuffed by the IAEA, Iran signed an agreement with Argentina, only to have Washington force Buenos Aires to back off in 1992. Five years later, the Clinton administration got China to abandon its official assistance to Iran on the fuel cycle.

It is worth recalling this history because it helps us to understand a core concern at the heart of the current crisis over Iran's nuclear programme: If Iran's intentions were peaceful, why did it go about its enrichment programme with so much secrecy? True, its safeguards agreement did not require it to declare the enrichment facility it was building at Natanz to the IAEA until six months before nuclear material was to be introduced into them. But the "concealed" nature of the facility and the furtiveness of its acquisitions programme have led some to conclude that Tehran secretly intended to make bombs. Even if not everyone

believes that, many countries feel Iran should suspend all enrichment activity as a confidence-building measure until the IAEA concludes that there are no undeclared nuclear activities in the country.

The Iranian response is one of bewilderment and even anger. When Iran openly sought to develop the fuel cycle and the IAEA was willing to help it, the U.S. intervened to stop this. Whenever Tehran signed a public agreement with an international partner, Washington worked overtime to kill it.

Given this reality, the only way to build a fuel cycle programme — even if one's aims were purely peaceful — would have been to go about it with stealth. But today, this stealth, which was imposed on Iran at a time when there was no evidence of non-civilian use, is being cited as evidence of malafide intention and as the main reason why Iran must agree to suspend enrichment immediately.

This week, the Iranian Government is likely to provide a formal response to the package of proposals presented to it by the European Union and five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council in June.

Security Council deadline

Though Iran had indicated its willingness to revert to the EU by August 22, the United States unnecessarily upped the ante by getting the UNSC to pass Resolution 1696 last month threatening Tehran with sanctions if it did not suspend all nuclear enrichment activity by August 31. "I can't understand the logic of the resolution," a senior Western diplomat based in Tehran told *The Hindu* earlier this month. "When they are saying they will give an answer by a certain date, why impose an ultimatum of this kind?"

"Having trust in each other is essential," Vice-President Esfandiar Rahim Mashaii told *The Hindu*, "but peaceful enrichment is our right and there can be no compromise." When his attention was drawn to a statement by Joschka Fischer in Tehran that week that Europe recognised Iran's rights but wanted trust to be re-established, Dr. Mashaii said the former Foreign Minister of Germany was not being honest. "When we wanted to build the Bushehr reactor and Russia agreed to cooperate, they put pressure on Russia not to do this work ... Why was Germany against this? They did not give us the right to even use fuel. But now that we have the ability to produce that fuel, they say, 'Don't produce it, we will give it to you!' Are they telling the truth? Whenever we retreat, they advance, and when we go forward, they retreat."

According to a prominent Tehran-based analyst, who spoke to *The Hindu* on condition of anonymity, the nuclear question has become a national issue in which "the right to enrichment is equated with Mossadegh's oil nationalisation and the same group of imperialist countries is being seen as denying Iran control over its energy security." The analyst, who has environmental concerns about Iran going down the nuclear route and is also opposed to President Ahmadinejad's confrontationist style, says the nuclear issue is just an excuse for the U.S. "In the Shah's time, Iran had even more oil per capita than it does now, but there were no objections to our nuclear programme. Essentially, the nuclear issue is being used to put pressure on Iran to change its foreign policy, especially towards Israel and the peace process. For example, the U.S. is not pressing Pakistan to even slow down its nuclear weapons programme despite the fact that they are the ones who have had ties to

non-state actors.”

The analyst believes the Iranian leadership is not particularly perturbed by the threat of sanctions. But the U.S. needs to realise pressure will only lead to a hardening of attitudes. “Even if we had a clandestine programme, as they claim,” he said, “I am certain this did not exist prior to 2000. But post 9/11, the ‘Axis of Evil’ speech and the invasion of Iraq — all of this has strengthened the hands of those who say Iran cannot trust the IAEA/U.N. system. In fact, some say the Bush-Blair policy was to use the IAEA and U.N. to ensure Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction before they concluded it was ‘safe’ to invade.”

There are some in Iran — notably Hosein Shariatmadari, publisher and editor of *Kayhan* — who say the country should quit the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) but the broad consensus within the ruling establishment is still in favour of dialogue and diplomacy. “I think the Iranian leaders want to resolve this peacefully... but want an honourable outcome which won’t harm Iran’s prestige.”

For many Iranians, Israel’s attack on Lebanon marked the opening round of an American-led military-political campaign aimed first, at forcing Tehran to abandon its civilian enrichment programme, and eventually at bringing about ‘regime change’ there. “The U.S. and Israel believe Iran is inflexible on the nuclear issue because it thinks it has the card of Hizbollah which it can play against Israel if military action is ever taken against its nuclear facilities. And I think that is why they decided to try and finish off Hizbollah,” says the analyst.

The irony is that whenever Iran has sought to reach out to the U.S. and establish the framework for a ‘grand bargain,’ Washington has responded with silence or contempt. In 2003, when Mohammad Khatami was President, an approach was made to the Bush administration via the Swiss embassy in Tehran for a dialogue aimed at an eventual rapprochement. The letter, which apparently had the blessings of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, included an offer to accept the Saudi initiative for a two-state solution to the Palestinian question. But the White House threw it into the dustbin.

That document, with its formula of a grand bargain including recognition of Iran’s rights and implicit recognition of Israel, was no flash in the pan. “If they accept our sovereign rights, we are prepared to make dialogue with any organisation or any country,” Dr. Mashaii told *The Hindu*. Asked whether that offer of dialogue included Israel as well, Dr. Mashaii repeated: “If the United Nations accepts our sovereign rights, we are ready to dialogue with any organisation or country.”

Anybody who knows Iran and its culture should understand it will never agree to suspend uranium enrichment under duress. The imposition of sanctions will make no difference but will only increase the clamour from neocons in the U.S. for airstrikes and war. What the world needs is a creative political solution that respects Iran’s rights and allays international concerns. The Europeans presented a package which seeks to bind Tehran to the NPT but which deliberately refrains from reaffirming Iran’s inalienable right to nuclear energy in conformity with Article IV of that treaty. No doubt Iran will formulate a response. The international community should seek to build upon that response and keep the dialogue going.

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