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IS THERE A DIPLOMATIC SOLUTION TO THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR ISSUE?

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Last week, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rejected Europe's most recent offer to halt uranium enrichment in exchange for various incentives, this time including a light-water reactor. "Your incentives," he said, "are definitely not more valuable than nuclear technology. How dare you tell our people to give up its gold in return for chocolate?"

Ahmadinejad's response is but the latest in a series of rebuffs suffered by various parties searching for a diplomatic solution to the Iran nuclear issue. A diplomatic solution to this problem is surely preferable to any alternative outcome and is the declared priority of most of those involved, including the United States, the European Union, and Russia. But the chances of achieving one are virtually non-existent unless there is a radical change in the way the international community approaches Iran.

Stripped down to the bare essentials, the problem is that Iran is conducting a program aimed at producing nuclear weapons. Notwithstanding Iran's vehement denials, that conclusion is sustained by both the IAEA findings and Iran's own actions. Had Iran wanted to prove otherwise, it would have acted differently, negotiating with the world in good faith, suspending indefinitely its nuclear activities, admitting all past misdeeds and offering complete and unhindered openness to

the IAEA inspectors. However, this is not the case. Instead, Iranian tactics have been to toy with the international community and buy time in order to promote its ultimate aim.

Iran could fully resolve the problem by stopping and then dismantling all activities that are related, in any way, to nuclear weapons development programs. Those include any uranium enrichment program, the construction of a heavy-water reactor, and any plutonium-related research and development activities. But anything less than good faith action by Iran, subject to effective verification, would constitute only a partial solution and would probably be counter-productive; as the two temporary suspension agreements have shown, such "solutions" only buy Iran precious development time. In order to assess the possibility of achieving a complete solution through negotiations, Iran's motivations must first be analyzed.

Prior to the change of presidents in Iran in early 2005, four motivations for developing nuclear weapons could be assessed: Iran's threat perceptions; its aspiration to status and regional hegemony; strengthening the regime domestically; and the regime's hatred of Israel. Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency and his rhetoric since then have brought the latter two considerations to the fore. But Iranian nuclear

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efforts are not just the personal whim of the new president, reflecting his deep religious beliefs; the weapons development program began long before he took office and is part of the Islamic Republic's longstanding policy.

Diplomatic means can prompt Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program only if they convince it that doing so is more appealing/less unappealing than continuing on its present course. The efforts led by the EU-3 beginning in 2003 clearly failed to produce this cost-benefit calculus. Those efforts confined themselves to economic "carrots" while avoiding any hint of "sticks," and either the "carrots" were insufficient or Iran was simply playing for time and not negotiating in good faith. Although details of the negotiations were not disclosed, the second interpretation appears to be the correct one. In fact, there was no breakthrough in any of the negotiations, either with the EU-3 or with Russia, and any time agreement did seem within reach, Iran immediately pulled back and returned to square one. These tactics were actually encouraged by Russia and China, who voiced their strong opposition to any coercive action against Iran and thereby deprived negotiators of any hypothetical threat of negative consequences for Iran if agreement were not reached. Thus, Iran remains in the enviable position of persisting in "no-cost" rejection of a policy change it wants to avoid.

This situation raises two underlying questions: is there a way to sway Iran by appeals to reason, and is there a way to coerce Iran into accepting a diplomatic, i.e., non-military, solution. Judging from Iran's past record and present behavior, the answer to the first question is probably negative. An answer to the second question can only be tested if those who negotiate with Iran are given coercive tools to use. But if non-military tools such as UN Security Council sanctions are precluded by the threat of vetoes, then such tools must be sought outside the UN realm, in an arena

like the IAEA (the stated preference of Russia and China), which has no enforcement authority and is even less likely to produce a solution (which is why it is also preferred by Iran).

Thus, advocating a "diplomatic" solution while coming to the negotiating table with what amounts to an empty hand is almost a contradiction in terms. Were the negotiators to arrive with a strong hand, i.e., agreement among the major international actors that Iran is required immediately and unconditionally to accept the Security Council's demands -- including the open-ended suspension of activities and the return to full-scale inspections -- then awareness of the consequences of refusing to do so might stand a better chance of changing Iran's cost-benefit calculus.

Even at the negotiating table, the vast differences in fundamental beliefs, values and logic between the negotiating sides must be acknowledged and taken into account. These differences probably contributed to the failure of previous negotiations or the breakdown of agreements and the subsequent reactions in the West to these failures. And even if negotiations start from the departure point stipulated above, they will be long and arduous and a successful outcome is not assured.

One cannot fault those who insist on a negotiated solution. A negotiated solution is the best of all options. However, starting the negotiations with what is clearly a losing hand could give Iran all it wants. If those who negotiate with Iran are armed with nothing more than appeals to reason or to the Iranian regime's better nature, there will be no diplomatic solution to the problem, and Iran's nuclear weapons program will be either be stopped by military means or it will not be stopped at all.

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