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Confronting Iran's Nuclear Ambitions: The Politics of Coalition Building

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In the weeks preceding the November meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors, a compromise proposal in the nuclear realm was offered to Iran, according to which Iran would be allowed to continue its work on uranium conversion at Isfahan but would have to move all its enrichment activity to Russia. The idea was to ensure that the uranium shipped back to Iran would be enriched only to the degree necessary for civilian purposes, but not for military use. Iran initially rejected the offer but subsequently said it would consider it further. Now that the Board of Governors has postponed referral of the Iranian case to the UN Security Council in order to allow more time for negotiations, the proposal will presumably be the subject of additional discussion.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this offer is that it received American support. Against the backdrop of US concerns that Iran is secretly advancing a military nuclear program and especially in light of the fact that Europe has finally accepted the US position that Iran is in non-compliance and that its program could be referred to the Security Council, it comes as something of a surprise that the US would

endorse a proposal that would enable Iran to continue work on conversion. The explanation seems to lie not so much in America's attitude toward Iran per se, but rather in the perceived need to draw Russia closer to the US and European position.

Confronting the suspected military nuclear ambitions of Iran is now more than ever a matter of international politics. It is clear that this process depends significantly on the ability of both sides to secure coalitions of like-minded states. Two coalitions – Iran and its supporters on one side, and the EU-3/US-led group of states on the other – are crystallizing around two basic positions. The first is that Iran has a legal right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, with no further questions asked; the second is that there are sufficient grounds to suspect that Iran's intentions are not entirely pacific, leading to a demand for assurances that Iran will not follow the military route.

While politics have been a prominent feature of the EU-3 negotiations with Iran from the start, the dominant sense until recently has been that it is possible to produce some kind of objective evidence of Iranian non-compliance with NPT

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obligations that would finally clarify in an unambiguous manner whether there are grounds to make concrete demands from Iran, failing which it could be subjected to sanctions. In fact, however, the evidence produced has always been open to competing interpretations.

The latest example of the importance of interpretation is found in the mid-November report of the IAEA Director General, Mohamed ElBaradei, which came less than two months after a strongly worded IAEA resolution warning of possible sanctions. In his latest report, ElBaradei once again made note of Iran's recent cooperation with the IAEA even while reprimanding Iran for not being transparent enough on some of the issues under review. Consequently, even after Iran was found to be in non-compliance, it managed in the following months to make enough cooperative gestures (such as allowing a visit to Parchin and expressing its willingness to continue negotiations), to sustain a case for non-referral to the UN Security Council. Iran has achieved this even while continuing its activities at Isfahan, which both Europe and the US view as a clear violation of the Paris Agreement reached in November 2004. In short, Iran has once again shown its skill in appearing to be sufficiently cooperative to ward off harsh measures, while utilizing the time to continue its nuclear activity. Iran is keenly aware of the political nature of the process. As a result, it has continued to complain that Europe and the US are politicizing what should be a technical issue and denying its clear legal right to enrich uranium but it has also skillfully seized every opportunity to use the "interpretation gaps" of the NPT to its advantage. More importantly, Iran has recognized the importance of coalition building in advance of anticipated votes in the IAEA Board of Governors and in the Security Council, and it has

been working hard to consolidate a coalition of states to block resolutions in these fora that threaten its interests.

In a little noticed development amidst the flurry of activities in the weeks leading up to the November IAEA meeting, Iranians met with representatives of Malaysia, Cuba and South Africa. Iran's Foreign Minister described those talks as positive, and they did produce agreement on the right of non-nuclear states parties to the NPT to be active in civilian nuclear programs. These developments are consistent with reports that Iran has been active over the last two years in offering cooperation and aid to numerous Third World countries in exchange for their support of Iran's nuclear program.

The fruits of Iran's efforts were apparent already in late September when the EU-3 were forced to water down the original resolution that they had hoped to pass at the IAEA Board of Governors' meeting because of indications that it wouldn't secure the necessary support. And even the watered down version did not garner unanimous support (which is unusual for such resolutions); India, which finally voted with the EU and the US, did so only reluctantly following heavy pressure from both the US and Iran. It is now clear that India would find it difficult to support the US and EU in the same way if the issue were put to a vote again.

What this means for the future of negotiations with Iran is still not clear, but as long as confronting Iran depends on votes taken in international fora, Iran may have found a way to stand up to Europe and the US. And now that the US and EU-3 have closed ranks, their next step may well be an overture to Russia.

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