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The Iranian Strategy: Solution or Delusion?

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At the onset of the second round of talks in Geneva between Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, Russia, China, Great Britain, France, and Germany), the West is projecting optimism on the chances for a diplomatic solution on Iran's nuclear program. Anyone whose aspiration is to solve this crisis peacefully hopes that the optimism is warranted, but optimism must not be allowed to turn into complacency. President Obama recently stated that the US remains "clear-eyed" entering talks with Iran. Thus as part of an astute American approach, negotiators should question the impact of the sanctions, and examine the Iranian calculus and timetable. Indeed, close scrutiny of the situation indicates a possible alternative plan by Tehran to any abandonment of its nuclear program, based on a strategy to ensure that Iran will become a de facto threshold nuclear state capable of producing nuclear weapons without the West being able to stop it.

The sanctions imposed on Iran have succeeded in forcing Iran to negotiate over its military nuclear program. However, sanctions sought only to bring Iran to a "reasonable deal" that would prevent the possibility of Iran using the agreement as a cover for continuing its nuclear program. President Rouhani has yet to embrace this objective, raising questions on whether the change in tone is a tactical shift to placate the West, or a strategic change in terms of an agreement he would actually be willing to sign. The Iranian proposals published to date offer only partial agreements that would increase oversight of some facilities and stop enrichment at a low level, a parameter barely effective in slowing down a breakout to the bomb should the regime decide on one.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the true decision maker concerning the Iranian nuclear program, finds himself between a rock and a hard place. He must balance the public demand to improve Iran's economic situation against the hardline ideologues and their demand to preserve the anti-Western values of the Islamic Revolution and reject any compromise on the nuclear issue.

So far Khamenei has pursued a sophisticated strategy. He expresses doubt about United States willingness to reach an agreement and distances himself from the overt gestures President Rouhani has made to the West, like the telephone conversation with President Obama. Publicly he supports the renewal of the talks, but attributes the initiative to

Rouhani and his government. By adopting this strategy, Khamenei has created a win-win situation for himself: if Rouhani succeeds in lifting the international sanctions in exchange for compromises that will allow Iran to preserve its nuclear capabilities, the Supreme Leader can take the credit; if Rouhani fails, Khamenei's anti-Western stance would be validated, thereby justifying more of the "resistive economy" and gaining more time for Iran to advance its military nuclear program. The advanced state of Iran's nuclear infrastructure can let Khamenei have Iran weather the sanctions if he manages to divert his people's frustration from a failure of the talks.

The prevalent notion in the West is that President Rouhani's declarations about his intention to resolve the crisis with the West within twelve months indicate that Iran wants to settle the issue quickly. While this may be true of Rouhani, who was elected to have the sanctions removed, this is only partially true of Khamenei. He would support an early agreement only if Rouhani can reach a deal that will preserve Iranian nuclear capabilities. Otherwise, Khamenei might prefer to drag out the talks indefinitely before they are pronounced a failure, thereby further advancing its nuclear capabilities and reducing the threat of a Western assault on Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

Consequently, it is incumbent on the West to operate on two levels: test Iran's intentions and consolidate a Plan B should the problematic scenario be realized. Three main aspects should be addressed in this plan.

a. *Defining a short timeframe for an agreement*: To test Iran's strategy, the United States must shorten the timetable for reaching an agreement in order to create a final, comprehensive package deal that will resolve all the aspects of the Iranian nuclear issue in a matter of a few months. This will allow the West to determine whether the Iranians are dragging their feet or not. Even if some confidence building measures are required at the outset, they must be made conditional on significant concessions at the end of a short, predetermined period of time. In any case, the sanctions against Iran must not be lifted until the implementation of the final agreement; removing them sooner could result in their collapse and the loss of the West's principal leverage against Iran before the end of the talks.
b. *Creating a line of communication with Iranian moderates*: Because the Iranian people are a major player in the talks between Iran and the West, the United States should open as many lines of communication with it as possible. In this sense, TV, satellite, and the internet are important for transmitting Western messages and raising the West's credibility among the Iranian public, especially the pragmatist elements. Even if the utility of these tools is limited given the Iranian regime's fairly effective control of the media, they would help the Western attempt to win the hearts and minds of at least some of the Iranian people. This is the only way to act against the regime's propaganda and prepare for future attempts to blame the West in case the talks fail.

c. *Creating an alternative to the talks*: The United States must work together with its partners in the talks to ensure that the pessimistic scenario of an Iranian "win-win" strategy that ends with the fait accompli of Iran as a nuclear threshold state does not occur. To this end, the West must create another alternative that would take a steep toll of the Iranian regime in the event that no agreement is reached. Recruiting Russia, China, and India to a new round of sanctions is the key to an economic threat with substantive impact, as these countries' trade with Iran was least harmed over the last two years. Furthermore, if the talks confirm that Iran is unwilling to provide credible guarantees that the agreement would not serve as cover for a nuclear breakout, the United States must raise the credibility level of its military threat. The combination of economic and military pressure is the only strategy that brought Iran to the talks in Geneva, and it can be assumed that it will be the only strategy that can ultimately persuade Iran to accept a "reasonable deal" if it refuses this option in current talks.

Iran's true intentions should be tested in the Geneva talks. Meantime, the West must uphold US Secretary of State John Kerry's statement that "words are no substitute for actions" and prepare for a scenario in which it will be necessary to raise the stakes on Tehran. This is the only way to ensure that the talks on the Iranian nuclear program relieve the world of any Iranian deception and bring it closer to a viable solution of the issue.