

Lessons from the Iran Nuclear Developments

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Brief Analysis

In the fluid situation surrounding Iran's nuclear program, perhaps the safest bet is to expect more surprises. Despite the promising draft circulated on May 19, it is not clear how meaningful a sanctions resolution adopted by the UN Security Council will be, even if it is adopted soon. Nor is it clear how vigorously Brazil and Turkey will pursue the trilateral agreement that the two countries reached with Iran on May 16. All the same, important lessons can be drawn from this week's developments.

Iran Reacts to Pressure

Even as Iranian leaders argue that they will ignore any and all pressure from the United States and its allies, the record demonstrates otherwise. This week's trilateral agreement reached by Iran, Brazil, and Turkey to refuel the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) was transparently done with the goal of forestalling sanctions at the UN. The backstory to the recent trilateral agreement is also of interest. For months, Turkey has been pressing Iran to agree to similar terms, but -- according to Turkish officials -- Tehran has been unresponsive. When U.S. and other Western officials downplayed the prospects that Brazilian president Lula da Silva could forge an agreement during his May 15-17 visit to Tehran, they were extrapolating from many months of Iran's refusal of essentially the same deal. What they had not factored in was the extent to which Iran responds to pressure.

It is worth recalling that much the same agreement was floated to Iran last November, only with better terms. In last year's negotiations, led by France, Russia, the United States, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (known as the "Vienna Contact Group"), the United States offered to provide Iran with safety-related modernizations to the TRR, if so requested by the IAEA.

Whereas Iran reacts to pressure, the regime is rarely responsive to inducements such as President Obama's offer to engage in bilateral talks without conditions or European offers in 2004-2005 to negotiate economic incentives and to address Iran's security concerns. Tehran has not only tended to ignore such inducements, it has often showed disinterest in the very incentives it has insisted be included in a deal. For instance, for years Tehran complained that the United States was blocking Iran's application to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). But when the Bush administration -- at the Europeans' urging -- lifted its objection in 2005, Iran proceeded to ignore the WTO for four long years.

Iranian Proposals Come with Multiple Escape Clauses

This week's trilateral agreement was showy. Iran appeared to concede on each of the three issues it had cited in refusing the November 2009 deal: first, that the agreement would cover a full 1,200 kilograms (kg) of low-enriched uranium (LEU), the amount needed to produce the fuel for the TRR; second, that the LEU was to be shipped all at once (shipped soon, according to Turkey, though this is not in the text); and third, that Iran's LEU would be stored abroad until the swap with TRR fuel takes place. Were the deal to proceed on these grounds, Iran's nuclear program would indeed be delayed by about the six to ten months it would take for Iran to produce a replacement 1,200 kg of LEU. In other words, the deal would reset the clock to last autumn, when the first accord about the TRR was reached, i.e., before Iran backed away from that agreement. This would represent progress, but notably limited progress, because the underlying issue -- Iran's refusal to suspend enrichment until it demonstrates to the IAEA the purely peaceful character of its nuclear intentions -- would not have been addressed.

The trilateral agreement was also more show than reality in the sense that the text provides for a complicated and difficult path of negotiations before the accord comes into effect. The agreement specified that Iran would notify the IAEA of willingness to proceed. Any further action would depend "upon the positive response of the Vienna Group," with Iran having the power to decide whether the response by the United States and its fellow team members was indeed sufficiently positive. Assuming that hurdle is cleared, negotiations would start to create a "written agreement and proper arrangement" with the Vienna Group. Inside Iran, important officials have set disturbing conditions for any such agreement, such as lifting all sanctions on Iran. At the least, tough negotiations could consume months during which Iran could proceed uninterrupted with its enrichment activities.

Even assuming prospective negotiations with the Vienna Group are successful, the trilateral agreement grants Iran the unilateral right to reclaim its LEU at any time if the regime decides that "the provisions of this Declaration are not [being] respected." Some in Iran suggest such an outcome would

be triggered by "threats" against Iran by the West. The Vienna Group, therefore, need not be included in any discussion about whether the agreement is being respected, and a neutral body such as the International Court of Justice need not be enlisted either. Iran can act alone.

To summarize: before the trilateral agreement would come into effect, Iran could demand many more concessions, and afterward, the regime could at any moment threaten to withdraw unless additional concessions were made.

Iran's Circle of Diplomatic Partners Is Shrinking

In the 1990s, Iran worked to divide Europe and the United States, with considerable success. How to approach the Islamic Republic was perhaps the issue on which the transatlantic partners disagreed most sharply during the first Clinton administration. By contrast, now the two sides work together closely, with leaders from each having decided that the Iranian "divide and conquer" strategy must be resisted through close coordination. The irony is that, given the sharper skepticism of the United States as compared to Europe toward Iran under both Clinton and Bush, some European governments now take a tougher line than the Obama administration.

For the last decade or more, Iran has had high hopes that Russia would block attempts by the West to slow its nuclear progress. But instead, Moscow has grown increasingly frustrated with Tehran, as evidenced by anger expressed over the revelation of the clandestine Fordow enrichment site. It was particularly striking to hear on May 17 Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov use the same language as U.S. officials in describing a new UN sanctions resolution as a process that should proceed independently of the trilateral agreement. While China has been more reluctant to cooperate fully with the other P-5 + 1 countries, Beijing does not seem particularly willing to buck the West (and its Arab friends) on behalf of the Islamic Republic.

Iran is not negotiating with Brazil and Turkey because the regime prefers these two nations as international partners, or because it thinks developing countries shape the world. Rather, Tehran had no choice: its previous, and preferred, interlocutors no longer bought the line that, this time, the Iranians would really cooperate. Tehran's track record suggests that over time, it will ply Brazil and Turkey with half-truths, delays, and backtracking. The challenge for U.S. diplomacy will be to contain the damage while Brazil and Turkey experience the learning curve firsthand.

Conclusions

It is not clear to what extent the developments of the past week can help resolve the basic issue at stake: whether, as repeatedly ordered by the Security Council, Iran will suspend its enrichment and reprocessing until the international community is assured of the purely peaceful intentions of the country's nuclear program. Neither the new TRR deal nor the proposed sanctions address that matter directly. The new TRR deal would at best buy time. One would have to be a considerable optimist to believe that the sanctions resolution put forward to the Security Council May 18 will compel Iran's hardline leaders to change direction on their nuclear intentions. When the dust from this current episode settles, the world may not be any closer to the goal, as formulated by President Obama, of "preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons."

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