

# Iranian-European Nuclear Deal: An Achievement with a Potential Poison Pill

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Oct 22, 2003

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## Brief Analysis

The October 21 deal between Iran and the European trio of Britain, France, and Germany has the potential to significantly reduce the risk of Iran producing a nuclear weapon from highly enriched uranium (HEU)—assuming the accord is implemented strictly and on a tight timetable. Yet, HEU is only one of two routes to a nuclear weapon; the other is plutonium. The Iranian-European deal makes more likely completion of Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, which will produce spent fuel that could be easily reprocessed in order to extract plutonium. Given that risk, this sort of deal—permitting completion of Bushehr in return for Tehran's pledge to abandon uranium enrichment—has been rejected by the United States for the past eight years. Indeed, the Clinton administration consistently pressured Russia, largely unsuccessfully, to reject such an arrangement as too dangerous. The Bush administration now faces the choice of affirming its predecessor's opposition to a Bushehr deal or supporting it in the name of transatlantic solidarity.

### The Plutonium Risk Unaddressed or Increased

Nuclear weapons can be made from either plutonium or HEU (e.g., the former was used for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, and the latter for the Hiroshima bomb). Yesterday's agreement does little to address the plutonium risk; indeed, it could increase that risk.

Until February 2003, the greatest U.S. concern about Iran's nuclear program was that Tehran could readily obtain plutonium if the Bushehr nuclear power plant were completed. Once activated, Bushehr would use low-enriched uranium for fuel; after 12 to 18 months, the reactor would begin to produce spent fuel containing plutonium. Processing spent fuel to extract plutonium is a chemical process that would not necessarily require any imported equipment.

Since at least 1995, the United States and Russia have engaged in testy discussions about how to approach this problem. Washington has long promised that it will provide incentives to Russia if Moscow agrees not complete construction of Bushehr. Moscow has insisted that it could complete the plant at minimal proliferation risk because it would monitor the spent fuel carefully and return it to Russia. Yet, spent fuel is so radioactive that it often has to sit in cooling ponds for years before it can be transported—hence, the material would be vulnerable to Iranian diversion.

As Russian president Vladimir Putin pointed out on October 21, regardless of the new European deal, Russia will not ship fuel to Iran until Tehran agrees to tighten restrictions on it. To date, Tehran has insisted on ridiculous terms for such an agreement (e.g., demanding compensation for giving up spent fuel even as other countries spend billions to isolate the material as waste).

The Iranian-European agreement has disturbing implications regarding Tehran's future access to plutonium. Under the terms of the deal, Iran agrees to suspend "processing" (presumably of spent fuel), but this concession has no practical value because Iran has not yet built a processing facility. On the issue of Bushehr, the language of the communiqué announcing the agreement is vague and could be seen as legitimizing completion of the plant: "The three governments believe that this [agreement] will open the way to a dialogue on a basis for longer term cooperation which will provide all parties with satisfactory assurances relating to Iran's nuclear power generation programme. Once international concerns, including those of the three governments, are fully resolved Iran could expect easier access to modern technology and supplies in a range of areas."

These statements imply that Bushehr can be completed. At best, then, the agreement undercuts the U.S. position and puts Britain, France, and Germany on Moscow's side of the ongoing U.S.-Russian dispute. The situation may be even worse, however. Various Iranian and international media reports have suggested that the Europeans discussed the possibility of helping with Bushehr by providing nuclear fuel. If that is indeed the price paid for yesterday's agreement, it would be too high by far.

#### The Enriched Uranium Risk Reduced

The great accomplishment of the Iranian-European agreement is that Tehran has pledged to suspend all uranium enrichment activities. International concern about Iranian enrichment rose sharply after discoveries during February 2003 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. To the surprise of U.S. and other intelligence agencies, the inspectors found that Iran had built 160 sophisticated centrifuges designed for uranium enrichment; an additional thousand centrifuges were in assembly, and facilities were under construction to house tens of thousands more. Iran claimed that it would only use the centrifuges to produce low-enriched uranium, which is the fuel used by Bushehr. Since then, Iran has announced that it has in fact begun enriching uranium with the centrifuges. Subsequent IAEA inspections found traces of weapons-grade HEU including some in a facility that Iran had insisted was never used for enrichment.

Since February, a crisis has emerged due to Iran's inconsistent and unconvincing explanations regarding its enrichment program. Hence, most analysts thought it highly unlikely that Iran would agree to stop enrichment. If implemented strictly, the Iranian-European agreement is a big step in this direction, and the European negotiators have reason to be proud. Yet, the agreement only addresses the enrichment problem uncovered in February. At best, then, the deal sets the clock back to January 2003, leaving unresolved all of the international community's concerns about Iran's nuclear program up to that point.

The Iranian-European communiqué is a statement of principles, not a plan for action. It contains many phrases that Iran could interpret in ways that would gut the substance of the agreement. For instance, does Iran's pledge to suspend uranium enrichment mean that it has agreed to stop building the centrifuge facilities in which enrichment would be performed, or has it merely agreed not to activate the centrifuges once they are built? And does Iran's agreement to "engage in full cooperation with the IAEA" really entail a change in behavior, given Tehran's insistence that it has been offering such cooperation for years? On these and other points, further clarification is necessary to transform the communiqué's fine language into concrete, verifiable steps. The grave danger is that Iran may be, in the words of an editorial in London's Financial Times, "just throwing sand in the IAEA's eyes to blind the world to its bomb-making ambitions."

## Next Steps for the United States

On November 20, the IAEA board will discuss whether Iran has provided the full accounting of its nuclear program that the board demanded of it by October 31. Tehran will not be on track toward a full accounting unless the Iranian-European agreement is made more specific in three areas:

- a tight timeline for implementation of Iran's important but imprecise promises, including its pledge to resolve "all outstanding issues" regarding its past activities;
- precise definition of the obligations that Iran has accepted via the communiqué's lofty language; and
- adoption of an inspection and monitoring program to verify Iranian compliance.

If Iran stalls on these items, Washington may wish to press the IAEA into seeking assistance from the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, the United States can urge Europe to use yesterday's agreement as a springboard to dismantle all Iranian enrichment facilities.

Reaching consensus on the plutonium risk will require Washington to more actively explain its concerns that a nuclear power plant could provide a ready source of fissile material. Through Iran's commitment to suspend processing activities, yesterday's agreement provides an opening for enhanced monitoring of Bushehr's fuel. At best, however, improved monitoring and inspection would give a warning time of only a few weeks or months if Iran diverted spent fuel to extract plutonium. Given Iran's track record of mass casualty attacks via terrorist groups—witness the 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing or the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing—it would only be prudent to consider other options. As Bushehr nears completion, the United States will need to enhance its deterrence against Iran.

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Policy #797

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