



***Nuclear Crisis Calls for US-Iran Dialogue
within a Collective 6+1 Framework***

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Following the meeting with the US, Russia and China in London on 16 January, Britain, France and Germany, the so-called EU Trio, have drafted a resolution that asks Mohammad ElBaradei, director-general of the International Atomic Agency (IAEA), to call for an emergency meeting of the IAEA Board on February 2-3 in Vienna to formally refer Iran to the UN Security Council. The US has said that it fully supports the move and wishes to see Iran “quickly” sent to the Council for “censure and sanctions” now that negotiations with the EU have failed to convince Iran to halt nuclear enrichment.

Russia and China, Iran’s major trading partners, are yet to become convinced that the matter is so urgent, and are against rushing Iran to the Council. They are concerned that it will further “complicate” an already complex matter, and could make Iran suspend cooperation with IAEA, among other retaliatory measures. Russians have put an alternative plan that calls on the IAEA to send Iran’s nuclear dossier to the Council but without invoking a “formal” referral process. In the absence of a formal referral, the Security Council may censure Iran but not impose sanctions.

To close the gap with the Russians and Chinese, the Europeans are insisting on formal referral but have said they will not ask the Council to impose sanctions on Iran, “at the moment.” Rather, the Iranian case will be “debated” in the Council and then “referred back to IAEA.” In response to criticisms that the “toothless” referral would serve no purpose, the EU Trio have argued that it will further internationalize the case, put additional pressure on Iran, and “empower” the IAEA. The US is tactically agreeing with the “incremental” approach of the Europeans, hoping that in time Russia and China will join the anti-Iran bloc.

Thus, as things stand, all five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany (the so-called 5+1) agree that Iran should be referred to the Council, but what should be done and how, at the UN and subsequently, is disputed. The lack of consensus is rooted in the fact that the states have differing concerns vis-à-vis Iran. While the US’ concerns are primarily political, predominantly about Israeli security, Russia and China have vast economic interests in Iran’s nuclear and energy sectors. European concerns, originally focused on human rights, fall somewhere in between the two extremes.

They also differ on the extent of Iran’s violations and rights. Russia and China did not vote for the IAEA’s September 2005 resolution that deplored Iran’s “many failures and breaches of its obligations,” and declared it in “non-compliance” with the Safeguards Agreement of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The resolution, which acknowledged Iran’s “inalienable right” to peaceful nuclear technology, also argued that “Iran’s concealment of its nuclear activities” and



“the resulting absence of confidence that Iran’s nuclear programme is exclusively for peaceful purposes” provides the basis for the intervention of the Security Council.

Notwithstanding its tough language, the resolution did not provide a “legal” basis for such an action. The IAEA has not determined that Iran has made a “diversion” from a civilian to a military nuclear program. The US-EU coalition now hopes that Dr. ElBaradei, in his impending report to the February meeting of the IAEA Board, would make that decision, but it would be hard for him to do so, as he would have to rely on circumstantial evidence and on Iran’s “lack of transparency and cooperation.” The fact that Iran is partially operating its nuclear conversion and enrichment plants will be of no big help to him.

At the heart of the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program is a deep lack of trust that prevails between Iran and the US. Iran’s “deceptions” aside, its “misbehavior” over the years has completely eroded American trust in Tehran. It is no wonder that the US, even if it has no sufficient fact, still insists that Iran “intends” to build nuclear weapons. Given the “crisis of confidence,” it is irrelevant if the American suspicions are real, a misperception, or are political in nature – aimed at regime change as Tehran charges. Because no mechanism exists to detect Iran’s intention, the dispute could lead to war.

It is not surprising that Iran’s confidence building negotiations, explanations and actions have made no difference. Iran has said that it concealed its nuclear program to avoid US sanctions; the Supreme Leader has declared “nuclear weapons against Islamic beliefs;” Iran has implemented the IAEA’s Additional Protocol allowing for surprise and intrusive inspections; Iran has called for a nuclear-free Middle East and collective regional security; and Iran is allowing international investment in its nuclear plants. The US-EU response to Iran: to build confidence, shutdown all your nuclear enrichment activities.

The confidence building is stalled in part because the US and Iran, the two main nemesis of Iran’s nuclear dossier, have not as yet engaged in direct diplomacy. As Europeans and Russians have talked to Iran, Americans have remained on the sideline, influencing the outcomes through indirect diplomacy. The fact that the Administration has “outsourced” the critical negotiations to the EU and Russians has been criticized by powerful voices in the US Congress, including Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY). Senator John McCain (R-AZ) has also demanded that the Administration “exhaust” every option before using “military strikes.”

The lack of US-Iran dialogue will become a larger national issue if the current situation evolved into a military confrontation. That possibility exists. Unfortunately, the veiled calls for direct negotiations with Iran by these same Senators and other Congressional leaders are lost among the more explicit and demanding calls by them and others for a quick reporting of Iran to the UN, imposition of multilateral “escalating” and “smart sanctions,” and the use of force as a “last option.” President George W. Bush has repeatedly said that sanctions will be imposed and the use of force remains an option.



Meanwhile, US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns has opined that “Iran is a threat to the international community,” and John Bolton, the US Ambassador to the UN, has said that President Bush is concerned that the present Iranian leaders can cause a “nuclear Holocaust” if they acquired nuclear weapons. These are code words for war or regime change. Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elevated to the status of “a new Saddam Hussein,” recently made the deplorable statements that the Holocaust was a “myth” and “Israel must be wiped off the map.” The fact that he cannot make war and peace decisions for Iran is conveniently ignored.

Faced with no serious domestic opposition for its refusal to negotiate with Iran, given the support from the Congressional leaders and complacency on the part of the public, and encouraged by its successive victories against Iran in the last few years on the nuclear front, the Administration has toughened its negative tone and position in recent weeks. It is now certain that the US will not settle for anything less than a complete victory over Iran at the Security Council and beyond. In words of John Bolton, the US wants Iran do what Libya did: to submit. Otherwise, Iran can expect to face a much tougher choice.

Yet, it is not at all certain that the US would ultimately benefit from taking Iran to the Security Council and further isolating it. When the UN entangles Iran, it can hardly escape from becoming another Iraq at a much larger scale. Consider the likelihood that Iran reacts by withdrawing from the NPT and stopping its oil exports; or the chance that threats and sanctions would fail to make Iran stop nuclear enrichment. Would it not then be logical to think that at some point the US would have to actually use force? In that eventuality, Iran will be destroyed but the US will not win the war either.

Complicating the situation is the fact that Israelis have a different timetable for Iran’s nuclear project than the US or the EU. While the latter are concerned about the actual time it may take Iran to build a nuclear device, about 7 years, Israelis are worried about Iran’s nuclear “point of no return,” which they say is less than a year away. Thus, the Israelis may not even want to give sanctions a chance even if they believed sanctions would ultimately make Iran forego its enrichment right. They have also repeatedly threatened that they will not tolerate a nuclear Iran and that they will act when they must.

If Iran were attacked, by the US or Israel, it would respond; and before the conflict can be contained, it would spread into a region filled with oilfields, terrorists, Islamic radicals, and unstable regimes. Moving forward, the US needs to consolidate gains and change strategy rather than push toward the UN Security Council, which would ultimately and logically lead to a military confrontation, resulting in colossal death and destruction, and making the Islamic regime more determined to build nuclear weapons. The logical progression of the US advances against Iran would lead to a regional disaster.



Fortunately, there exists an alternative to the US unintentionally destroying Iran and engulfing itself in another regional quagmire, namely, to adopt an innovative diplomacy based on an “out of court settlement” mechanism that ensures good intentions and partnership as opposed to an approach that is set to verify intentions or punish a suspected one. However, given the circumstances of the nuclear case, such diplomacy is currently only possible within a collective 6+1 framework: the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany plus Iran. The good news is that the framework minus Iran already exists.

Iran might originally hesitate to join thinking that the 6 powers could “gang up” against it. However, it would not be difficult to convince Tehran to join given the dangerous deadlock over its nuclear program. Iran understands that the tough US talks it often calls a “psychological warfare” are for real, and that its options are progressively limited. The enlarged and collective framework also provides Iran with an opportunity to engage with great powers, and secure the implementation of whatever solutions emerge. Iran can also use the framework to legitimately justify whatever compromises it needed to make.

The US should accept Iran join the framework to give diplomacy a better chance to succeed. Refusal to engage Iran could cripple the Administration’s public diplomacy with the Congress, the international community, and the American public, who would have to pay for a possible confrontation with Iran in blood and money. The skepticism from the US invasion of Iraq persists. Unless the Administration is for regime change, this framework will help it determine if diplomacy with Iran has really failed. Otherwise, it cannot claim to have “exhausted everything else” as Senator McCain and others have demanded.

A host of problems and past experiences have prevented Iran and the US from engaging in direct dialogue, even if a “strategic imperative” for such an approach had long existed. Among them, the “legitimacy” concern has been a key stumbling block. The US has been concerned that any negotiations with the Islamic regime will increase its “legitimacy,” making it much harder to deal with a regime that supports terrorism, opposes the Middle East peace, abuses the human rights of its people, and does not allow for free elections. Incidentally, the Supreme Leader of Iran has made the opposite claim that negotiation with the US decreases Tehran’s legitimacy in the Muslim world, where the US is highly disliked.

With the 6+1 framework, this concern is resolved as the two sides negotiate directly but not bilaterally, and thus can stay their grounds. The US and Iran did indeed similarly negotiate within the 6+2 framework set up to deal with the Afghan crisis before the US overthrew the Taliban regime. The 6+1 framework will also resolve Iran’s perception problem that the US wants to change the regime, and that the “nuclear crisis is fabricated” to justify that US purpose much in the same way that the US used Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” to invade that country. The US has repeatedly denied the charge and can now use the 6+1 formula to more definitely dispel the “myth.”



There are other reasons that justify the adoption of a collective 6+1 framework for an out-of-court settlement of Iran's nuclear crisis. For one, the disastrous experiences with North Korea and Iraq in the Security Council can be avoided. The framework can also help prevent a possible rift among the 5 powers with differing concerns vis-à-vis Iran. Even the EU may not stand with the US if the crisis developed toward a "use of force" scenario. China and Russia are expected to resist cooperation at an even earlier stage. The Non-Aligned countries now fear that the NPT in its present form may not survive as a "double standard" is applied to define members' rights and obligations.

Iran's nuclear crisis is a global matter that requires global cooperation, a transparent purpose, a grand solution, and a win-win result. Imposing preconditions, using threats, remaining indifferent to the concerns of others, and closing hearts to acceptable compromises are harmful. Negotiations within the 6+1 framework must be based on such an outlook, and begin by acknowledging that Iran's nuclear crisis is partially rooted in US-Iran animosity. Therefore, any sustainable solution must also incrementally help reduce the current tensions between the two countries caused by a host of other disputes.

To address the concerns of the US and others, the immediate purpose of the negotiations should be to make Iran's nuclear program peaceful. The Russian proposal that Iran enrich uranium in Russian plants provides a good point to begin negotiations now that Iran has welcomed the idea. That type of arrangement could be later replicated with other countries. Meanwhile, Iran must continue to fully cooperate with the IAEA on the basis of the Additional Protocol, practice full transparency, and submit to stringent technical verification mechanisms. Iran's intentions would remain a subjective matter and can only be verified through a resolution of the current crisis of confidence, which requires US-Iran cooperation.

Iran's three main concerns must be also addressed: regime security, national security, and energy security. Many in Tehran believe that the US intends to change the regime in Tehran. The Bush Administration has conditionally and quietly denied the charge; it must do so categorically and publicly. Iran lives in a dangerous neighborhood. Even if it has not invaded any country in recent history, it has been invaded a few times. A regional defense pact could diminish its concern. Iran has vast energy sources, but its oil and gas sector are under US sanctions. A gradual lifting of the sanctions would be required.

If managed well, the 6+1 negotiations could lead to a grand bargain between the US and Iran at some future point, leading to normalization of relations. If that were to happen, a true win-win situation would develop. Beneficiaries would include not just the two peoples and governments but also countries in the region, including Israel, and the global business community. Even the opposition to the Islamic regime will gain more from normal US-Iran relations than they have from US-Iran animosity. Trade and economic interactions have their own magical ways to melt dictators.



There are many among us who argue against US-Iran negotiations and normal diplomatic relations, which they think would help the regime to stay in power longer, further abuse human rights, and continue to forestall democratic change. They must be reminded that absence of the US from Iran in the last 26 years has not helped their cause; and that no country has ever become democratic in the absence of normal diplomatic relations with the US. Experience in Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe indicate that normal diplomatic ties with the US are a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for democratic change. In the case of Iran, reforming Islam, diversifying the oil economy, and promoting coalition politics are among other key conditions.

Finally, the current complacency regarding the dangerous state of US-Iran relations must end. Congressional leaders and civil society actors concerned about another US war in the region must demand that the US involve Iran in direct diplomacy. Currently, this is not the case, as many remain complacent in the face of jingoists who are actively promoting the war option. Worse yet, key congressional leaders have in recent weeks demanded that Iran be reported to the UN Security Council for sanctions, and have said that the use of force must remain a “last option.” In calling for such a policy, they could promote a dangerous confrontation which they will surely end up opposing long after it has happened.

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