



The US-Iran Big Deal

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Note: This editorial was written a week before the Bush Administration offered to join the EU-trio in direct talks with Iran if Tehran were to suspend its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities. The US has now joined the Europeans, offering a package of incentives and disincentives to Tehran. We believe these ideas, which Tehran is currently studying, are major steps in the right direction. However, the Big Deal idea proposed here is still a more effective approach for a breakthrough in US-Iran relations.

In the last several months, the Bush Administration has consistently rebuffed calls for direct talks with Iran made by the highest ranks of the Iranian Government, the European Union, Russia, China, the UN Secretary-General, a growing number of Congressional leaders from both parties, several American and European former Secretaries of States and National Security Advisors, and many experts and former diplomats and high-ranking military commanders.

Instead, the Administration has zealously pursued its recent policy of isolating Iran internationally and destabilizing its regime internally. This dual track policy is hoped to provide the conditions for the use of force against Iran's nuclear and military facilities and for a revolutionary upheaval to overthrow its "evil" regime if Tehran were to continue with the current course. The policy is pursued in the name of protecting the world peace and bringing democracy to the Iranian people.

The latest indication of this policy of war and regime change came early in May 2006 when the Bush Administration rejected a proposed resolution at the UN Security Council that called for a partial adoption of the Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, including multilateral sanctions. The US wanted to have the entire Chapter adopted, which authorizes the use of force, a demand that Russia, China, and the US' European allies all rejected.

Last February, the State Department announced it will spend \$85 million in 2006 and possibly 2007 to "empower civil society" and "deepen ties with the Iranian people." The Administration hopes this effort will lead to a revolution in Iran akin to the "colored revolutions" in Eastern Europe which overthrew the Communist regimes there. A new Office of Iran Affairs with branches in Dubai and elsewhere will lead the efforts.

The mix of war and regime-change will not be supported by the Iranian people and it cannot achieve the denuclearization and democracy goals for Iran. Instead, the colossal death and destruction that will follow would only postpone Iran's nuclearization and lead to the formation of a national fascist government in Tehran. Normal relations with the US and stability in the Persian Gulf will also become dreams far into the future.

The US has two choices going forward. It can stay with its current approach for short-term gains in the nuclear front at the expense of democracy for the Iranian people. Given the pressure for direct talk with Iran, this approach is hardly sustainable. Alternatively, the US can change course toward a bold and innovative engagement that will denuclearize Iran and help with the democratic transformation in the country. I call this approach the Big Deal to highlight its gallant design for US-Iran relations.



The American Big Deal for Iran should include a huge pile of incentives matched by an equally huge pile of disincentives, both placed on the negotiation table with Iran publicly. The piles would have to be big enough to leave Iran with no choice but to take one. If Iran were to take the incentives pile, it would have to stop enriching uranium for a definite period, while reserving its rights to restart for civilian use, and hold future elections free and fair.

Tehran will, without a doubt, take the big incentives pile as otherwise it would face the rage of the Iranian people, who have paid dearly for the war with Iraq, the Islamic revolution, and American sanctions. They are not for another war or revolution, and the majority supports normal US-Iran relations in the hope of a new grand opening in their rather strained living conditions.

The disincentives pile will essentially mean a continuation of the existing war and regime-change approach, which would now have to be given even sharper teeth. The incentives pile should include diplomatic ties, lifting of American sanction, and security guarantees for Iran. The other permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany will, expectedly, endorse the Big Deal.

Many will criticize the Big Deal approach as a non-starter given the highly charged environment of US-Iran relations. But the problem is that no half-measures will ever work with the Islamic Republic. Unless Tehran is given a clear choice between war and peace, and the Iranian people are made to see the costs and benefits of the choices offered, The Islamic regime will resist changing its behavior.

The no-war no-peace state of affairs that has prevailed between Tehran and Washington in the past 27 years is no longer sustainable. Unless Tehran mends relations with the US through diplomacy, and does this in a timely fashion, the US will be forced to settle the dispute with Iran using its military might. In that case, the force will be used not just against the regime, but against the Iranian people as well.

Critics must be also reminded that no nation has ever become democratic in the absence of diplomatic ties with the US, and that dictatorial states tend to seek bombs more than democratic states because they are more security-conscious. Experiences in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe indicate that diplomatic ties with the US are a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for democratic transformation.

The Big Deal is the only feasible alternative, and it serves all parties involved: the US and Israel will secure Iran's denuclearization, the Islamic regime will acquire security, and the Iranian people will gain free elections. The world will also gain peace and economic stability. Normalization of US-Iran relations would also make them once again partners in peace and economic development in the region.

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