

The Nuclear Standoff: Iran Faces the US-EU Coalition

This week the world was expecting to receive some good news from the much-talked “nuclear initiative” of Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He revealed the initiative on September 17 at the United Nations. Unfortunately, and to Iran’s surprise, instead of coming as a relief, it further disappointed the European Union and the United States. They dismissed the initiative as an “aggressive” move toward escalation of the nuclear crisis. What irritated the Europeans and Americans the most was Dr. Ahmadinejad’s nuclear nationalism as reflected in his reiteration of Iran’s determination to put into operation its “inalienable right” to enrich uranium for the purpose of producing energy, and to defend and safeguard the nuclear technology as a national asset and a source of national pride.

Iran’s new nuclear nationalism was put on display later that day in a lecture delivered by Dr. Ali Larijani, Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator, to a gathering of over 600 Iranian-Americans at the New York Hilton. He compared Iran’s current struggle against the US to preserve its “nuclear technology” to the struggle in 1950s against Britain to nationalize its oil industries. He said that today, countries without “modern” technologies, such as nuclear, bio, and information technologies, are not modern. The nuclear technology, he asserted, was Iran’s path to modernization and asked the audience to help safeguard this national treasure. Many observers of Iran, including several Western journalists who have visited the country, have indicated that most Iranians favor nuclear technology but wish to see it advanced peacefully.

The nuclear nationalism aside, the Iranian initiative included four points. One, Iran will never build a nuclear bomb as it is against the country’s national interest and the teaching of Islam. Two, Iran will accept and implement all regulations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, including its safeguard and transparency requirements as well as its provisions for the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Three, Iran would be ready to negotiate with all interested countries (presumably including the US) if such talks are conducted within a framework of agreed-upon goals. Four, Iran is prepared to involve domestic and foreign private sectors (presumably including Americans) in the country’s nuclear technology investments to increase trust and transparency. This last initiative is new and very important, because it will involve the investors in the operation, who can make sure there is no diversion.

The EU and the US have set the red line at enrichment and have said that they will not allow Iran to cross that line. Because of Iran’s “past behavior,” they distrust its words and intentions. As things stand, the gap that has developed between Iran and the West seems unbridgeable as both sides are determined to stick to their positions, and currently no mechanism is in place to even begin a new round of talk. This August, Iran’s negotiations with the EU Trio (Britain, France and Germany) collapsed following the announcement of an EU “incentive package” that Iran found “insulting”. Iran then resumed the uranium conversion program at Esfahan, and said that it will also soon

resume its uranium-enrichment activities at Natanz. Iran had voluntarily stopped both conversion and enrichment while negotiating with the EU Trio.

This week, the 35-member Board of Directors of IAEA is meeting in Vienna to find a solution to the standoff between Iran and the West. The US and the EU are now more than ever before determined to take Iran to the Security Council of the United Nations for a warning resolution or trade sanctions. They have drafted a “summon” that asks Director General Mohamed ElBaradei "to report to all members of the Agency and to the Security Council and General Assembly of the United Nations ... Iran's many failures and breaches of its obligations to comply with its NPT Safeguards Agreement." It also urges Tehran to terminate uranium conversion and never resume enrichment to avoid referral to the Security Council. It is debatable whether they could get the resolution pass the IAEA Board. Already South Africa, Malaysia, and Cuba have objected to the text and China may also soon join along with other members of the Group of 77 (Non-Aligned).

Iran has already dismissed the US-EU Security Council threat as a “negotiation ploy,” and has said that even threats of military strikes will not change its mind. Dr. Larijani on September 20 warned that "If we are sent to the U.N. Security Council, we will review our stance on the additional protocol and will not hesitate to resume uranium enrichment." He added, "If they threaten to use force against the Iranian nation, Iran will review its perspective on the IAEA and the NPT." Iran seems overly confident of its relative strength given the high oil prices, the US-UK problems in Iraq, the hurricane Katrina disaster in the southern coasts of the US, and the support it expects to receive from Russia, China, India and members of the Non-Aligned Group. However, at the meeting in New York City with the Iranian-Americans, Dr. Larijani emphasized that in the standoff with the West, “Iran is only relying on the power of its nation.”

In its inaugural address to the IAEA’s Board Meeting on September 19, Dr ElBaradei said “we need a number of additional transparency measures that Iran needs to take, including access to certain sites, including access to certain individuals, and including making a number of documents available.” He had previously said that, “the ball is very much in Iran’s court on this issue.” On September 20, he told reporters in Vienna that, “regrettably we are going through a period of confrontation and political brinkmanship.” Iran, in turn insists that it has cooperated with the Agency more than any country and that the over-extensive investigations of sites, documents, and individuals have provided no clue that Iran’s nuclear activities are anything but peaceful and within the NPT framework. Mr. ElBaradei’s latest report does indeed state that the investigations have not found any trace of nuclear bomb-making activities in Iran.

While the Board of IAEA is discussing the matter for a possible compromise solution, Iran and its opponents are heavily lobbying Russia, China and the Non-Aligned member countries. For the time being, these countries and many members of the Non-Aligned group, notably India, do not favor the Security Council path, arguing that a premature reporting will lead to dangerous consequences, including Iran’s self-ejection from the NPT. In the past, the Board has made its decision consensually rather than by vote. French Foreign Minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, on September 20 said that the

Europeans would “build an international consensus” over Iran’s nuclear plans and if needed, would refer Iran to the Security Council. In the absence of a Board consensus, the US and the EU have indicated that they would ask for a vote. Both sides claim that the majority within the Board favors their position. In reality, a split vote, no matter who wins the case, will dangerously alienate the loser.

As things stand, growing confrontation will characterize relations between Iran and its opponents in the coming months. The IAEA Board this week may wisely issue a pleading warning to Iran for more cooperation and compromise rather than sending the case to the United Nations. The US-EU coalition might even agree to this intermediate step in the hope of a consensus the next time the Board meets. The anti-Iran coalition believes that ultimately Russia, China and India, among others, will side with it, as no country seems ready to stick up its neck for Iran given the dangerous nature of the confrontation. Meanwhile, Iran needs to take a few steps to change the course away from confrontation: maintain its voluntary halting of enrichment for a specified time period, respond to the Agency’s call for more transparency, and put the more positive and innovative aspects of its initiative to practice.

The US-EU might think that they will be better off taking Iran to the UN. There, some have argued, they will be in a no-lose situation. If the Security Council failed to arrive at a punishing resolution because of possible veto by China or Russia, then the US-EU coalition could take the matter in its hand and impose its own measures. Unfortunately, such war-mongering advice will not serve the interests of either side or the world as a whole. Never before had the US, Iran and the world needed more peace, particularly in the Middle East, than they need today. As recent military confrontations have shown, wars can destroy but even when they are “won,” they have no value for building better societies and more constructive partnerships. Let us hope that both Iran and its opponents understand this simple fact and take all and every measure to arrive at a compromise solution.

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