



National Iranian American Council

PROMOTING IRANIAN-AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE

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A COUNTERPRODUCTIVE PRECONDITION

Iran's announcement regarding the expansion of its uranium enrichment capability to 3,000 centrifuges grabbed headlines this week. It also comes in the wake of a turbulent period covering its seizure and release of 15 British sailors, a dispute with Moscow over the supply of fuel for its Bushehr reactor, and defiance of Security Council resolutions regarding its enrichment activities.

Hawks in Washington view this development as further proof of Iran's malicious intent, translating into a greater urgency to deal more firmly than before with that country. And despite the low standing of their credibility today, these hawks still affect U.S. policy regarding Iran. This is evidenced by the continued insistence of the Bush administration on preconditions to direct talks with Tehran—regardless of the fact that this approach has yielded little but greater tension to date with no promise of anything but more of the same going forward.

The key precondition that has been in place for nearly one year now and which has arrested any

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progress in the nuclear negotiations, has been the demand that Iran unilaterally and verifiably suspends its nuclear enrichment activities prior to bilateral talks.

Rather than halting Iran's nuclear program and denying Iran enrichment capability, the insistence on this precondition has granted Iran more time to pursue its nuclear program and prevented the very negotiations that can resolve the nuclear stand-off.

Washington has failed to win a single concession from Tehran by insisting on the precondition. The Iranian government has defiantly and categorically rejected this demand, while declaring its willingness to negotiate without preconditions. Clearly, the United States has paid, and continues to pay, a high price for the administration's unwillingness to adopt a more flexible position. The insistence on the precondition has not only prevented nuclear talks, but also diplomacy in regards to Iraq and America's position in the Middle East.

The greater the tensions are with Iran, the more tenuous our footing in the region will be—in turn requiring deft diplomacy of the sort the Bush administration has been hard pressed to demonstrate in the past. Some key points of reference challenge the basic assumptions inherent in the precondition adopted by the Bush administration regarding Iran.

First, Iran to date has not responded to unilateral demands

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or ultimatums put to it (whether by the United States, UK, or the Security Council) by becoming more malleable. To the contrary, it has become more defiant. This disconnect is particularly relevant given that the U.S. is both distracted in Iraq and incapable of removing the regime in Tehran. The current approach speaks of nuclear negotiations while actually ensuring they don't occur.

Second, sanctions and pressure is imposing a cost on Iran but are unlikely to convince Tehran to throw open the doors to its nuclear facilities. On the contrary, Iran has responded by scaling back its cooperation with the IAEA, a step that decreases the international community's insight into Iran's activities, which in turn increases the risk for proliferation.

Given Tehran's pattern of behavior, there is little to indicate that that additional sanctions or greater U.S. pressure will yield any different outcome. The recent authorization by the Iranian parliament of the termination of all cooperation with the IAEA (at the discretion of the government) should be seen as foreshadowing.

Moreover, if the current trajectory of the nuclear standoff continues, what also becomes clear is that the Bush administration has no endgame to prevent Iran from exercising a trump card: unilateral withdrawal from the NPT. Yet the administration's insistence on unilateral suspension does nothing to reduce the likelihood

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of this happening. Instead, it makes it more probable over time as increasing U.S. pressure via the Security Council, feeds Tehran's worst suspicions.

Third, additional insight can be gained from Iran's relationship with Russia, which has been crucial in finishing the Bushehr reactor, helping Iran process fuel, and upgrading Iran's technical know-how. These contributions have not been cheap or free for Iran. In March, the two countries engaged in public dispute about Iranian payment for nuclear fuel for the Bushehr plant and Iran has long been unsatisfied with the slow pace of the reactor's completion. A notable sentiment made public during this recent dispute by Iranian officials was that Russia was not viewed as a reliable long-term partner.

This view is underscored by reports that Moscow was seeking additional concessions to resolve the March dispute. Continuing to remain inflexible on starting negotiations will only drive Iran further and more firmly into Russia's arms—a development arguably contrary to both U.S. and Iranian long-term interests.

Fourth, as the recent incident with the British service personnel in the Persian Gulf illustrates, Iran does respond to diplomacy and can work constructively to resolve a tense situation.

While the coordination among Iran's various institutions during this recent episode remains unclear, in the end the collective Iranian leadership made a decision in the face of opposition by radicals to bring an end to the crisis. This pragmatism should not go unnoticed in Washington and will be essential in the process of opening bilateral talks.

The longer the Bush administration balks at direct diplomacy, the greater the cost of negotiating with Iran for future U.S. presidents. The administration has already missed several opportunities, including the notorious Axis of Evil categorization following Iranian assistance in Afghanistan in 2001-02; the fumbling of a direct overture made by Tehran in 2003; and most recently, it's ignoring of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group.

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