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..Dec 2009..

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ANATOMY OF A NUCLEAR BREAKTHROUGH GONE BACKWARDS

Less than three months after rising expectations on the possibility of a breakthrough in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, hopes of sealing a deal that would transfer the bulk of Iran's low-enriched uranium abroad have dissipated.

Yet another attempt to engender trust between the US and Iran has instead led to more distrust and Obama's mantra about "talking to Iran" looks more and more like the Bush administration's policy: all sticks and no carrots.

The hoped-for transfer of Iran's LEU abroad is on the verge of becoming a precondition for further substantive talks, placing the Obama administration where the Bush administration was for years, insisting on the suspension of all enrichment-related activities before negotiations could begin.

The present impasse cannot last, and a risky confrontation could easily ensue. Cooler heads, of course, could prevail, leading both sides to set aside the rancor surrounding the deal and return to the negotiating table. If talks do resume, both sides should study their missteps closely.

Miscalculation in Tehran

Neither the general agreement in Geneva nor the later technical agreement in Vienna could have come about without the explicit consent of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. On September 29, right before the Geneva meeting, Khamenei's most visible lieutenant, Ahmadinejad, said publicly, "We have offered to whoever is prepared that we will buy the material from them. Of course, we are prepared to hand over 3.5 percent material, have them enrich it up to 19.75 or 20 percent and deliver it back to us."

As such, Iran's interlocutors simply seized upon an opportunity offered by Tehran. But the reversal was also Tehran's and the question is why.

The most credible explanation for the reversal is that Khamenei and Ahmadinejad underestimated the volatility of Iranian domestic politics pursuant to the fraudulent June 12 presidential election. Just as they dismissed the popular anger at the fraud itself, assuming the furor would pass at the protesters' first sight of blood, so they miscalculated the intensity of elite

reaction to the idea of transferring Iran's LEU.

That reaction came from all corners, and it was ferocious. Perhaps the ferocity is explained in part by the determination of rival factions that Ahmadinejad not don the mantle of peacemaker with the US after all he and his supporters have done to sabotage previous attempts to improve relations. But after four years of bluster averring Iran's absolute rejection of any compromise on the issue of enrichment, the elite was naturally skeptical that a single quick meeting should bring about such a rapprochement.

There is evidence that the negotiators themselves were aware, at least partly, of how strong the objections might be. But they chose to deflect them with mendacity. In the initial news coverage of Geneva, the pretense was that at Geneva Iran's interlocutors "were solely informed of Iran's decision to participate in the October 18 meeting with the IAEA."

But these attempts at misinformation backfired and fueled suspicion that additional details of the agreement remained hidden. Quest-



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tions abounded: Why were the public and the parliament being kept in the dark? Why could not there be a simultaneous exchange? What guarantees were there that Iran would indeed be given the 20 percent enriched uranium after it let go of its "strategic asset"? How could the Russians be trusted after the numerous delays in the start of the Bushehr reactor? Was the transfer the first step toward the voiding of the UN Security Council resolutions demanding suspension of enrichment-related activities? And what if Iran's interlocutors persisted in asking for suspension after the transfer?

Ahmadinejad did push back against the criticism. He mocked his detractors for saying that he, of all people, would put Iran's interests in jeopardy. He pointed out again that no previous nuclear negotiator had been able to induce the West to implicitly acknowledge Iran's right to enrichment.

But for the remainder of the Islamic Republic's elite the agreement simply happened too fast, the details were murky and Ahmadinejad's spin ran up against the reality that nothing in the agreement guaranteed the West would ever accept enrichment on Iranian territory.

Foremost in many Iranian minds, moreover, was apprehension that Ahmadinejad, and maybe Khomeini as well, were "giving in" to the West in order to curry favor with the international community and proceed with their repression of the post-election dissent.

There is also evidence that the hardliners were rattled by the

agreements' reception in the international press presenting the transfer as a means to control Iran's nuclear ambitions. Ahmadinejad acknowledged the confluence of foreign and domestic pressures: "Unfortunately some people fell for the line that the agreement is a conspiracy and a deception.... These are the same people who were asking us to back down at the height of the nuclear pressures on us. Now they have become super-revolutionaries."

Endgame?

Khomeini and Ahmadinejad are, of course, the most to blame for Tehran's reversal. They failed to gauge Iran's post-election climate accurately. They must also be considered naïve for thinking that the Obama Administration would not portray the transfer of LEU as a viable means of checking Iran's nuclear ambitions.

But neither is the Obama administration fault-free, if the US intent at Geneva was to strike a bargain limiting Iran's enrichment program and instituting a robust inspection regime. When the agreements encountered opposition, the US could have counseled forbearance and continued negotiations.

Instead, impatient with Iran's messy domestic dynamics, the US chose a more familiar path: announcements of deadlines, patronizing speeches and ominous reminders that the clock was ticking. In effect, Washington's insistence that the Geneva and Vienna drafts were the only offer on the table turned the tentative agreement into an ultimatum.

Already under fire for caving into Western pressure their political opponents likely imagined, Khomeini and Ahmadinejad could hardly bow to pressure that was real.

In the end, Tehran also responded with characteristic bombast, bragging about ten new enrichment facilities. In reality, in striking such an outlandish pose, reeking of bluff, Tehran had the more mundane intent of reminding Obama of the cost of no agreement.

It understands that the Obama administration continues to be faced with a familiar choice.

It can declare diplomacy dead after only one meeting and begin the arduous process of putting together a coalition behind sanctions that will actually bite as the Bush administration did for many years unsuccessfully.

Or it can try genuine bargaining based on two key lessons learned in the course of the misadventures of the fall of 2009: First, to neglect Iran's domestic arena is to strangle agreements in their infancy; and second, even the most intransigent arch-conservatives in Tehran are willing to entertain a compromise over Iran's nuclear program.

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