

THE ASIAN CENTURY

Is Ahmadinejad Now Free to Make a Nuclear Deal?

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BERLIN – In Istanbul this week, representatives of Iran and the “5+1” group (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany), led by European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton, will resume talks about Iran’s nuclear program. No breakthrough is likely, but the outcome could be more favorable than many expect.

In October 2009, an initial understanding was reached, according to which Iranian low-enriched uranium (LEU) would be delivered to Russia for further enrichment and conversion into fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). But this accord faltered on Iran’s domestic politics: President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s political adversaries effectively blocked it. Might the same thing happen again?

Ahmadinejad, who was severely weakened after his disputed reelection in 2009, has now consolidated his position. Representatives of his regime are still concerned about what they see as externally backed attempts to stage a “velvet revolution” in the country, but there is little fear of new challenges from within.

One conservative intellectual put it in almost Nietzschean terms: “Yes, two million people took to the street after the elections. But they were voters, not fighters. They criticized the situation. But no one wants to change the system by force.” In other words, there is no will to power on the part of civil society and the opposition.

Many who protested against the regime in 2009 are disillusioned. Ordinary people do not hide their contempt for the regime, but they also see that last year’s mass protests have failed. Many have withdrawn into the private sphere – education and culture for some, business for others. Visa applications are increasing, indicating preparations for limited or prolonged sojourns abroad.

While Iran’s leadership continues to repress liberal dissenters, it feels secure enough to talk of “reconciliation” with parts of the “loyal” opposition – Ahmadinejad’s conservative and reform-oriented adversaries who want to preserve the Islamic system as such. Within the president’s camp as well, there are discussions about the post-Ahmadinejad era and possible successors to him – all, however, assuming regular presidential elections in 2013. Until then, despite frequently harsh criticism of his performance, the president is seen to have a mandate to govern.

The effects of the latest round of international sanctions on Iran are somewhat ambiguous: they have weakened the country, but they do not seem to have weakened Ahmadinejad. Withdrawal of European companies is delaying necessary investments and forcing Iranian firms to seek less-favored alternatives, mainly in China and Russia. Prices are increasing, more transactions are being conducted in cash, and more dubious business figures are arriving from around the world.

But, while government officials do not deny that sanctions worry them, they point to Iran’s high foreign-currency reserves and the Iranians’ creativity in coping with the effects. Moreover, Ahmadinejad uses the sanctions as political cover to pursue his economically sound – but deeply unpopular – policy of slashing subsidies on electricity, petrol, and bread.

Though economic pressure is unlikely to force the regime to abandon uranium enrichment, unity on sanctions among the five permanent Security Council members, and moves by the EU, Japan, and South Korea to sharpen them further has had an impact. Most importantly, sanctions have strengthened those within the elite who favor negotiations, and weakened those who are deeply critical of Ahmadinejad’s unhidden interest in doing business with the West, particularly the United States.

For Ahmadinejad and his supporters, there are two main reasons for engagement with the US. First, they know that an understanding with the US would be popular, particularly among educated youth and the business community. Second, Ahmadinejad and the political leadership believe that the regime is under serious threat from the US – and only from the US.

American officials often underestimate this threat perception and deep suspicion of US intentions, but they are powerful factors in Iranian politics. While Iran’s ruling elite appears to be divided over the prospect of a full-scale rapprochement with the US, they share this underlying fear of America and do not want their country to be isolated further.

Given this background, it is quite possible that this time Iranian domestic politics will not undermine a new agreement to swap Iranian LEU for fuel rods for the TRR. The 5+1 group has an interest in reducing Iran’s stockpile of LEU and the risk of its use at some point for military purposes. Iran, for its part, has an interest in securing both the supply of fuel rods for the TRR and the international community’s implicit acceptance of its uranium-enrichment efforts, as well as in engaging with the US.

Any such deal will be possible only if it responds to both sides’ interests. It would certainly help if Iran began the talks with a commitment to end its enrichment of uranium to the level of 20%. Even Iranian officials admit that there is no (civilian) purpose for such a program if the 20% enriched fuel rods for the TRR are actually produced in Russia.

Another clear signal of Iran’s intention to settle the dispute would be progress toward ratification by Iran’s parliament of the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The 5+1, for their part, should indicate that an eventual agreement on the basis of “minimum enrichment and maximum controls” is possible.

Agreement on a LEU fuel swap would not resolve the nuclear dispute between Iran and the West, but it would open the door for a diplomatic process that could eventually reach the core of the problem – Iran’s uranium enrichment and the risks of diversion for military purposes. If the Istanbul talks go well, they could provide a road map for further negotiations, not only on the nuclear issue, but also on Afghanistan, the Middle East, and terrorism. Even if they only provide an avenue for bilateral engagement between the US and Iran, they will still prove to be worth the effort.

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