

The right options for Iran

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With U.S. President George W. Bush in Europe getting EU leaders to agree to toughen U.N. sanctions against Iran, and with the ongoing debate between John McCain and Barack Obama about whether the United States needs to talk with Iran's rulers, the issue of Iran's nuclear program is heating up. Iranians, no surprise, are watching this debate with interest. They need to do more than watch.

Iran's political elite see the United States, rather than Europe, as their appropriate international counterpart. Only the U.S. can give the Islamic Republic the security guarantees it craves. The U.S., indeed, should be prepared to eventually give such guarantees if it wants Iran to stop the more suspicious parts of its nuclear program.

But Iran must do its part to make any future dialogue with the U.S. a success. In talks with members of Iran's policy community, I am continually astounded that they see resolving the nuclear conflict (or, indeed, other problems in which Iran has a stake) to be primarily the responsibility of the U.S., Europe, and other major powers, not of Iran.

Such passivity is not in Iran's interest. As the Middle East's essential regional player, Iran can trigger and heat up conflicts as well as contribute to their solution. Yet few in the Iranian establishment understand that being the leading regional power brings responsibility; and that only responsible behavior can create legitimacy and acceptance that Iran craves. Iranian policymakers must, therefore, try to develop their own ideas for a negotiated resolution of the nuclear and other regional security issues, as well as to think about how Iran can rebuild trust in its actions.

Iran's leaders should begin by shunning hostile rhetoric. Incendiary statements about Israel exacerbate the lack of trust among Iran's would-be partners, and make it hard for those in Europe and the U.S. who are interested in building more favorable relations. Iran hints that it wants to have a high-level dialogue with the U.S. in the not-too-distant future. If true, Iran should realize that violent statements on sensitive issues will set back any serious attempt to get a dialogue going.

Iran could also build trust if it became more transparent, particularly about its own strategic ambitions. A good start would be to publish key documents that are constantly referred to by Iranians but never seen - say, Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa that reportedly rules that Islam prohibits the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons?

It would also be helpful if Iran laid out its strategic vision for the region. It should accept the concerns of its neighbors, seek to develop its own ideas for regional confidence- and security-building, and participate in efforts to create regional security arrangements. It should also positively respond to offers from the U.S. to establish confidence-building measures between the two countries' military forces, particularly their navies.

As to the nuclear issue, Iran should try to switch from the language of “inalienable rights” to one of pragmatic solutions. This would help depoliticize the issue. The right to independent nuclear research and development under the NPT is not disputed. But rather than insist as a matter of principle on operating the fuel cycle independently under national sovereignty, Iran could engage the Saudis about their idea of a regional joint venture, or explore different options of multilateral consortiums with other countries. Iran's parliament, now led by Ali Larijani, Iran's former nuclear negotiator, could make a strong contribution to confidence-building and to the resolution of the nuclear conflict by ratifying the NPT's Additional Protocol.

Other clarifications are also needed. Is Iran prepared to accept a compromise that responds to European and other international concerns about its nuclear program, and thereby gain wide-ranging economic, energy, technology and science cooperation? Nuclear energy, after all, is only one technology, and a 20th century, rather than a 21st century one at that. Eventually, partnership with Europe could help Iran keep the best of its young generation at home rather than having them queue for visas at foreign embassies - or, more often, the U.S. consulates in Istanbul or Dubai.

The willingness of major countries to accept Iran with a nuclear status similar to Japan's depends on Iran not only referring to itself as a status quo power - which it occasionally does - but also on acting as such. If it wants to be seen as a status quo power, it needs to accept local and international efforts at establishing peace between Israel and its neighbors.

For a grand bargain with the U.S., Iran needs to end its support for militant organizations like Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which undermine efforts at reaching a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. Even without such a bargain, however, Iran will have to do certain things if it wants to be seen as a constructive regional player. It will have to accept all the other states in the region as legitimate players with their own legitimate interests as much as it wants to be recognized as such itself.

It will also have to accept the wish of the huge majority of Palestinians for a peaceful settlement with Israel. Iranian officials sometimes try to make out President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's violent statements about Israel to be merely a call for “regime change.” That is not a status quo policy.

Iran is entitled to seek assurances against externally forced regime change. But it cannot have it both ways, seeking guarantees against regime change at home and promoting it in its neighborhood.

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