

THE U.S. AND IRAN

A new approach, no illusions

By Volker Perthes

Whether a peaceful resolution of the nuclear conflict with Iran is possible still hinges on three factors: an international consensus that Iran should not acquire a nuclear weapon; the willingness of the United States and the West in general to communicate to Iran and others that the conflict with the Islamic Republic is about proliferation, not about the character of the regime; and domestic politics in Iran. The latter includes the balance of forces between Islamo-nationalist ultras and pragmatists in the Iranian elite, and Iran's reading of world developments, U.S. intentions and other factors that influence Tehran's security perceptions.

It is quite clear that Iran's nuclear program is carried by an elite consensus. There is no agreement, however, about how far the program should go. Tehran seems to have made no decision yet about whether to proceed with building a nuclear bomb.

The Iranian nuclear program is not so much driven by ideology as by a mixture of ambitions and fear. Ambitions include the wish for prestige and scientific progress; fear concerns genuine feelings of insecurity - not only because Iran is virtually surrounded by U.S. troops and allies.

The election of Barack Obama and the prospect of a new administration with a new agenda have an impact on policy debates in Tehran. The Iranian elite and broader public have once again taken note that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (who asserted earlier this year that America would never elect a black man as president) lacks some understanding of world affairs, whereas pragmatists like Ali Larijani, the speaker of Parliament, clearly pinned his country's hopes on an Obama victory.

More importantly, here is an incoming American president who has stated that he is prepared to talk to Iran directly and, in principle, without preconditions. He also has made clear that he wants to involve countries in the region - certainly including Iran - in efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Obama has no intention to keep U.S. troops in Iraq longer than necessary.

It is no coincidence that some members of the Iranian elite have gone so far as to applaud the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement, recently approved by the Iraqi Parliament. While this agreement legalizes the U.S. presence in Iraq for another period, it also shows that this presence is going to end in a foreseeable future. Even more important, the accord illustrates that foreign troops in Iraq will not be used to launch attacks on other countries in the region.

Obama's agenda on Iran is generally sound. The question now is how to proceed. With an eye both on domestic developments in Iran and the need for thoroughly prepared diplomatic moves, the "freeze-for-freeze" offer of the so-called EU 3 plus 3 (France, Germany, Britain, China, Russia and the United States) seems just the right option for the time being: It foresees that Iran refrains from installing new centrifuges while the six members of the group refrain from further Security Council action for the same period, initially for six weeks. This period can be used to calm fears on all sides and continue talks in the current format, under the leadership of the EU's minister of foreign affairs, Javier Solana, with the presence of a high-ranking U.S. official.

High-level bilateral talks between Washington and Tehran would not begin before the fall of 2009. And they should not, unless Iran responds to Obama's inauguration with a considerable confidence-building measure, such as the suspension of enrichment or improving the IAEA's access to Iranian nuclear installations.

The prospect of re-opening diplomatic relations between the two countries would boost Ahmadinejad's domestic popularity tremendously before Iran's presidential elections next summer. But there is little reason to help him win re-election, if he does not show that he wants to do business.

Parallel to the 3+3 talks, the new U.S. administration will have to rely on a low-level engagement with Iran for the first half of the coming year, concentrating on bilateral confidence-building measures such as the possible opening of a visa section in Tehran.

In addition, the two sides should focus on areas of cooperation with regard to Iraq and Afghanistan. There is no doubt that Iran needs to be involved in international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Iranian and Western interests overlap there in many instances: Neither wants the Taliban to return to power and both want to curb drug production.

After the Iranian presidential elections, Washington and Tehran may be prepared to hold serious bilateral talks. We should not have too many illusions, though. Most probably, the West will have to realize that Iran, with or without Ahmadinejad, will not be prepared to give up its nuclear "achievement" - the 4,000 or more centrifuges that will be installed by that time.

It would be totally unrealistic for the United States and the West to insist on dismantlement of centrifuges as a condition for or the outcome of negotiations. Instead, it would be necessary to reach a package deal that includes maximum safeguards and controls of Iran's nuclear program.

It may be useful to explore issues such as improving various options of an IAEA-controlled international consortium for the production of nuclear fuel that would involve Iran and other countries in the region. Exploratory seminars with the participation of Iranian and international experts could help to prepare the negotiations.

The possible package deal also would have to refer to the cooperation of Iran on Afghanistan and Iraq, an Iranian acceptance of the content of the Arab Peace Initiative; a restoration of full U.S.-Iran diplomatic relations and the settlement of bilateral issues between the two countries, such as frozen Iranian assets in the United States.

Would Iran be prepared to accept such a deal? We don't know for certain, but probably yes. Iranians understand that if Obama tried this approach, and Iran still refused to cooperate, the legitimacy of other, more coercive options would steeply increase.

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