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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

To Iran, One Step at a Time

By VOLKER PERTHES

BERLIN — American and Iranian leaders have signaled that they're prepared to talk. That's good. But getting results may prove to be more difficult than they imagine.

To begin with, it is most unlikely that any talks could start before Iran's presidential elections, set for June 12 .

The incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, probably fears that just entering into negotiations with the "Great Satan" could alienate some of his core supporters. And an unsuccessful first round would give his challengers political ammunition.

The fact is that the first round is unlikely to be successful. The positions and expectations on both sides, and their notion of who should take the first step, are too far apart.

A senior Iranian official of the reformist persuasion told me that President Obama's approach to Iran through a message on the occasion of the Iranian New Year was welcome, but that it was seen only as a response to Ahmadinejad's letter of congratulation on Obama's election. "We need to see deeds, not sweet words," the official said.

Wasn't Washington's readiness to participate officially in the nuclear talks a tangible step, I asked? "Not really," my interlocutor responded. "It is only the correction of a mistake. So the ball is now in the U.S. court." American officials will certainly see this differently.

Beyond that, both sides are likely to enter any talks with basically unchanged positions. Up to now, Iran has said that it is prepared to negotiate, but not to give up enrichment or any other part of its nuclear program. The "5 plus 1" group (the United States, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany), however, sees Iranian enrichment as the core problem. The Security Council has passed five resolutions demanding that Iran suspend enrichment.

The idea that Iran, whoever is president, would agree to dismantle its centrifuges is hardly realistic. In earlier talks with the EU-3 (Britain, France, Germany), Iranian negotiators insisted that Iran would maintain a pilot project with some 40 centrifuges. The Europeans did not agree. Today, Iran has more than 5,000 centrifuges, and the Iranians will certainly take what they already have as a basis for negotiations on any long-term freeze of their program.

Both sides will have to widen the parameters of compromise. The “5 plus 1” will have to define what level of independent Iranian nuclear activities they can accept, and what sorts of safeguards, guarantees and policies they would want from Iran.

On the Iranian side, there has been little thinking so far about the limitations Iran could accept if it wanted to reassure the international community that the program is indeed for civilian purposes only, as Iran claims. Iran’s political leadership has probably not decided yet how far it really wants to go down the nuclear path. Iranian decision-makers usually seek consensus on strategic decisions, and this can be time-consuming. Time, however, could become a critical factor.

If negotiations or pre-negotiations drag on, Iran will continue to produce low-enriched uranium (LEU) at its facility in Natanz. Theoretically, LEU can be transformed into bomb-grade highly enriched uranium with the same centrifuge technology, so growing stockpiles of LEU in Iran will make other regional and international actors — not least Israel — increasingly nervous. Those in Israel who argue for attacking Iran’s nuclear installations could gain the upper hand.

While the Obama administration is not likely to allow Israel such an adventure, Washington will also not be prepared to let negotiations draw on forever. If talks with Iran do not bring tangible results within a reasonable time, President Obama will not find it difficult to gather international support for more robust measures, primarily stronger sanctions.

The regional situation does not make things easier. Israel is already demanding tougher sanctions, and its Likud-led government argues that Israel cannot make progress with the Palestinians until the Iranian threat is lifted. Arab states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies are anxious about Iran’s growing political power in their region.

However, the regional situation also offers opportunities. Tehran’s and Washington’s interests with regard to Iran’s immediate neighbors overlap on significant aspects — both do not want a return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan or a Talibanization of Pakistan, and both support the Maliki government in Iraq. So it makes sense to involve Iran as a full partner in international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In contrast to its policies on Israel and Palestine, Iran tends to be pragmatic in dealing with its immediate neighborhood. Security risks, such as the flow of drugs from Afghanistan, do not allow for ideological posturing.

Iran is not a single-issue country. It needs to be engaged on various issues and on various tracks.

Nuclear talks will have to be resumed once a new or re-elected president is in place. The “5 plus 1” remains a practical format for that, demonstrating that despite the importance of American participation, this is a multilateral issue. At the same time, a bilateral U.S.-Iranian format should be established to deal with issues such as Iran’s policies toward Israel, terrorism, frozen Iranian assets in the U.S. and diplomatic relations.

For the time being, these unresolved issues should not stand in the way of cooperation on matters such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq or even maritime security in the Gulf. On the contrary, de-linking regional cooperation from the nuclear issue may help build the trust needed for a successful resumption of nuclear and U.S.-Iranian negotiations.

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