

San Francisco Chronicle

Blueprint for breaking stalemate with Iran

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Sunday, March 21, 2010, E06

The diplomatic path to solving the nuclear conflict with Iran seems blocked once again.

The U.N. Security Council may impose sanctions, but few officials in Europe or the United States believe that such measures would actually force Iran to change its ways. European observers do not think the Obama administration is preparing military action against Iran. They understand that Washington has no interest in another war in the Middle East, that it tries to restrain Israel from considering a unilateral attack, and that it wants Iran to return to the negotiating table. To overcome the stalemate, the West might need to devise an Iran policy that reaches beyond the conflict over Iran's nuclear program but does not ignore it. Four elements of a broader Iran policy are essential:

First, regarding the nuclear program, the international community should focus on the minimum goal of creating the conditions for further and wider-reaching diplomacy. For this, we should leave it to Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency to seek an agreement on the basis of the Iranian proposal to place 800 kilograms of its low-enriched uranium under agency control inside Iran or in Turkey and then exchange this material against fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor.

This would fall short of U.S. and European expectations, as Tehran would still maintain control over a substantial amount of low-enriched uranium. We would not lose anything, however: Washington and its partners could tolerate such an agreement without being party to it; existing sanctions would not be scrapped; earlier offers would remain on the table. More important, Iran would terminate its efforts to enrich uranium to a higher degree than is needed for a nuclear power plant. One lesson from the Cold War is that even minimal agreements that do not solve the main problem can be useful, exactly because they help to regain diplomatic space.

Second, Western policy should address human rights more forcefully. It is necessary and legitimate to demand that Tehran at least respect the civil rights that the Iranian Constitution guarantees. Among other things, the European Union could draw up a list of Iranian officials who are responsible for grave human rights violations and will therefore be denied visas. Europe in particular should make clear, however, that it will remain open to Iranian students and to cultural and scientific exchanges with Iran.

Third, we need to better explore the chances to cooperate with Iran on regional matters. Iran and the West have common interests with regard to the stabilization of Afghanistan and containing the illegal drug trade from that country. Practical cooperation on these issues would not only support our efforts in Afghanistan, it could also contribute to rebuilding a modicum of trust between Iran on one side and the United States and Europe on the other.

Fourth, we need to prepare for the possibility of diplomatic failure: What if Iran crosses the line and gains a military nuclear capability? Certainly, we aren't there yet. The answer, however, lies in extended deterrence - in credible U.S. security guarantees for its friends in the Middle East. The deployment of missile defense systems on U.S. vessels in the Persian Gulf is the right message: It reassures Israel and the smaller gulf states, it signals to Iran that Washington will stand by its friends, but it does not threaten Iran or withdraw the perspective of engagement.

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