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Can an Interim Agreement with Iran be Reached by July?

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Iran is playing down the latest EU decision on the imposition of additional sanctions, including an embargo on Iranian oil imports that will take full effect by July 2012, but the summer date constitutes a clear deadline for reaching some sort of agreement with the West. Iran is apparently beginning to feel the pressure of the sanctions imposed by the Security Council and the additional sanctions imposed by the US and the EU, evidenced by Tehran's agreement to renew talks on the nuclear issue. The experience of previous discussions, however, does not augur well for fruitful talks in the future. In the past, the Iranians used discussions to buy time, which they used to intensify efforts and advance their program to the point that they have the potential, should they so choose, to produce a nuclear weapon within one year (more or less) from the moment of decision. It is as yet uncertain whether the Iranians have changed course and are willing to appease the international community.

For the international community, trying to resolve the issues all at once would likely be a prescription for failure. Therefore, a step-by-step approach would perhaps have a better chance of success, aided by the increasing pressure of sanctions. This approach, if successful, could have positive effects on both Iran and their protagonists.

While the West is constrained at the moment by the Security Council resolutions that contain an unequivocal demand for the suspension of all activities related to uranium enrichment and plutonium production, the new July sanctions can be suspended by the EU – should Iran take concrete steps to prove its willingness to reach an agreement that will ultimately put an end to the nuclear threat in a way that will satisfy the West and not be too painful for Iran, especially regarding loss of face. Such steps might be proposed in the context of renewed negotiations with Iran. A first step could be the suspension of all activities at the underground enrichment facility at Fordow, near the city of Qom. For the West this would furnish some breathing space from a clear and imminent danger, and there would be no loss of face for Iran, since the installation is not yet fully operational.

This, however, is only a first step in a long process. As the next interim step, an agreement would have to be reached that on the one hand would reduce Iran's potential to produce a nuclear weapon within a short time, and on the other preserve Iran's ability to operate its nuclear reactors by assuring the supply of nuclear fuel. Iran's military nuclear potential depends on its stocks of low enriched uranium (LEU), on the setup of specific gas centrifuge cascades that would provide the further enrichment of uranium to high levels (HEU), to the turning of HEU gas into uranium metal spheres, or cores, and to the existence of nuclear explosive mechanisms, into which the HEU metal cores can be inserted, turning them into a uranium explosive device. Although little more than a demonstration of goodwill, Iran as the next step could suspend its enrichment of uranium from 3.5 percent to 20 percent, and immediately place all 20 percent LEU under international custody. If agreed upon, this could be used to produce – outside Iran – the fuel needed for the operation of the Tehran research reactor (TRR). Iran would still need to provide stricter assurances that material was not being produced illicitly, or that material was not being diverted to illicit use. In return, the US might lift some of the banking restrictions, which would ease the pressure on the Iranian currency, or any step that would still be permissible within the Security Council sanctions. Iran's accession to the IAEA Additional Protocol, which it signed a long time ago but implemented for a short time only, would also be needed at this stage.

All things considered, the above steps are feasible, and could be achieved in a relatively short time, given the willingness of both sides to do so. Successful implementation of these steps would bring some relief to both sides, perhaps establish some confidence in the negotiations process, and create an opportunity for the future.

Still, both sides would have a long way to go before the world is assured that Iran does not pose a serious nuclear weapons threat, and the Security Council sanctions can be lifted. The steps outlined above are just preliminary ones in a long game that in the past bore fruit for the Iranians only.

As seen at present, and as must be assumed when sitting down to the most serious next phase of the talks, the Iranians' ultimate aim is to achieve the potential to produce as many nuclear weapons as possible in the shortest possible time. In order to reach an agreement, Iran would have to surrender this aim, or at least suspend it until some further opportunity. At present, the Iranian strategy is simple: to buy time for its nuclear program, thereby increasing its production of LEU and its potential for the production of nuclear weapons. This strategy could change very quickly for the worse should Iran decide to “break out” and take steps that would realize this aim. The first two steps prolong the timetable somewhat, but do not suspend it.

Should the Iranians decide to sit down to serious talks, they would surely use tactics that have helped them immensely in the past. These include: setting unacceptable or troublesome preconditions; inserting extraneous matters into the agenda; drafting a very loose timetable (weeks and months between meetings); changing meeting venues; procrastinating in replying to suggestions; accepting a suggestion and then not receiving the endorsement of more senior officials (or Parliament); wording agreements ambiguously, and being the excellent negotiators that they are, using hitherto untried and unpredictable negotiation tactics. The one predictable element is the bargaining tactic, where a concession on the Iranian side must surely be matched by a concession by the opposite party. Although under usual circumstances this could be considered as fair play, the time for concessions on major issues is past. Time is a scarce commodity in the Iranian situation.

Should Iran fail to agree to these first, rather hesitant, steps, or fail to comply with any agreement that was achieved during the negotiations, it must be made aware that the world may have reached a moment of decision: that the sanctions have failed and other, more serious actions will need to be taken.

