

Obama's Doublespeak on Iran

Extending Hands or Clenching Fists?

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Global Research, June 12, 2010

[CounterPunch](#) 9 June 2010

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

On April 12, 2010, President Barack Obama hosted a forty-seven nation Nuclear Security Summit in Washington. He met with dozens of heads of state making his case for a fourth set of crippling sanctions on Iran because of its intransigence on the nuclear issue. His main argument was the refusal of Iran to accept the proposal by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of transferring the bulk of Iran's low enriched uranium outside the country in exchange for medical nuclear isotopes.

The following day Obama met with President Luiz Lula Da Silva of Brazil and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey. Both countries are currently members of the UN Security Council, considered friends of the US and are emerging economic and regional powers.

Lula and Erdogan emphasized to the US president the importance of a diplomatic resolution to Iran's nuclear issue in an effort to diffuse the crisis and build confidence-building measures for further negotiations. During the meeting Obama not only encouraged them to pursue a diplomatic breakthrough, but he also vowed to be constructive and flexible, as well as promising to send them in writing the parameters of any deal deemed acceptable to the US.

Encouraged by the American response, the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davtoglo flew to Brazil on April 16 to meet with its president in order to coordinate their diplomatic efforts in a last ditch effort to persuade Iran to accept the IAEA proposal. By April 20, the Turkish foreign minister was in Tehran testing the waters regarding a possible resolution to the crisis.

As promised, Obama sent two separate letters on April 20 to Lula and Erdogan detailing the US parameters of a possible deal. He wrote that his proposal represented "a detailed explanation" of his perspective and offered "a suggestion of a way ahead." He said that his offer was based on the proposal put forth by former IAEA Director General Mohammad ElBaradei, which he characterized in the letter as "fair and balanced," and would enable "both sides to gain trust and confidence."

In his letter, Obama detailed four conditions for any resolution to be satisfactory to the US. The first condition was "Iran's agreement to transfer 1,200 kg of Iran's low enriched uranium (LEU) out of the country." He emphasized that this condition was essential and non-negotiable.

Second, he demonstrated his willingness to be "flexible and creative in order to build mutual confidence" by agreeing "to support and facilitate action on proposal that would provide

Iran nuclear fuel using uranium enriched by Iran," a crucial demand by Iran which it has always insisted was its right under the NPT treaty.

Third, Obama offered his acceptance to the compromise suggested by the IAEA last November by allowing "Iran to ship its 1,200 kg of LEU to a third country," suggesting Turkey as the designated country. He went further by offering assurance to Iran that its fuel would be held "in escrow" in Turkey "as a guarantee during the fuel production process that Iran would get back its uranium if we failed to deliver the fuel."

His final condition was that Iran has to convey to the IAEA in writing its "constructive commitment to engagement through official channels."

Armed with the concrete American conditions and after receiving a positive response to negotiate, conveyed to Davtoglio by the Iranian leadership, the foreign minister of Brazil Celso Amorim flew to Iran a week later on April 27, to prepare for a state visit by Lula to hammer out a final agreement based on the American proposal.

The Brazilian president arrived in Tehran on May 15 and was joined by the Turkish prime minister the following day. In an 18-hour negotiation marathon session, the two world leaders impressed on the Iranian leadership the significance of accepting all four parameters outlined in Obama's letter.

On May 17, an agreement based on the American and IAEA proposals was signed by the foreign ministers of all three countries. A week later Iran submitted an official letter to the IAEA acknowledging the pact and stating its intention to transfer its LEU to Turkey within one month once the plan was accepted.

To the complete surprise of Brazil and Turkey, the White House and the State Department dismissed the deal out of hand within 24 hours, rejecting the same principles outlined in Obama's letter. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even called it "a ploy" before a hearing in the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations on May 18, declaring that a sanctions resolution against Iran in the Security Council is imminent.

In an interview on June 3 in *Jornal do Brasil*, a major newspaper in Brazil, ElBaradei expressed his profound disappointment and surprise at the American reaction. He explained that the proposal signed in Iran was the same as his proposal, which was accepted by the West in the past.

Further, he explained that "if you remove over half of the material that Iran has to Turkey, that is clearly a confidence-building measure regarding concerns about Iran's future intentions." As for the remainder of the nuclear-enriched material in Iran he stated that, "the material that will remain in Iran is under IAEA safeguards and seals. There is absolutely no imminent threat that Iran is going to develop the bomb tomorrow from the material that they have in Iran."

The refusal of the Obama administration to embrace its own proposals not only undermines its credibility before its foes but also confuses its friends such as Brazil and Turkey. Obama was elected on the promise of hope and change by offering the international community, especially the Muslim World, new politics based on honesty and mutual respect.

In his inaugural address, repeated in the Cairo speech, Obama said regarding Iran "we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." But in Elbaradei's view, it was the US

that has clenched its fist when Iran stretched its hand.

The former IAEA head effectively exposed Obama’s doublespeak in the same interview to the Brazilian paper by declaring that the deal signed in Tehran “should be perceived as a first good confidence measure, a first effort by Iran to stretch its hand and say we are ready to negotiate.”

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