

The world must stand firm on diplomacy: The ‘nuclear crisis’ is the product of 15 years of US hostility towards Iran

Persian Puzzle: Part III

By [Siddharth Varadarajan](#)

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WHEN BRITAIN, France, and Germany volunteered last year to try and find a diplomatic alternative to the punitive measures the United States was demanding against Iran, the expectation was that the European-3 would have the skill — and the gumption — to craft a solution that would address the legitimate concerns of both Teheran and the ‘international community.’

What were these concerns? The world needed assurance that Iran’s pursuit of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment, would not lead to nuclear weapons, and Iran needed assurances that it would not be denied access to civilian technologies or subjected to sanctions or the threat of aggression by the U.S. and Israel, both of which possess nuclear weapons. Accordingly, the [Paris Agreement](#) signed by Iran and the E3 on November 15, 2004, spoke of a solution that would “provide objective guarantees that Iran’s nuclear programme is exclusively for peaceful purposes.” In exchange, Iran was to be provided “firm guarantees on nuclear, technological and economic cooperation and firm commitments on security issues.” Given this framework, Iran said its voluntary suspension of enrichment-related and reprocessing activities “will be sustained while negotiations proceed on a mutually acceptable agreement on long-term arrangements.”

Last month, the E3 slammed the door on the possibility of a “mutually acceptable agreement” by [presenting proposals](#) that turned the spirit of the Paris accord upside down. Iran was told permanently to abandon its enrichment and reprocessing facilities and heavy water reactor and provide “a binding commitment not to pursue fuel cycle activities other than the construction and operation of light water power and research reactors.” In other words, the only possible “objective guarantee” the E3 was prepared to accept against misuse of enrichment facilities was for Iran not to have them at all.

As if this was not provocative enough, the E3’s proposals on the guaranteed supply of enriched uranium and security assurances were so vague as to make a mockery of the concepts of “firm guarantees” and “firm commitments.” For example, far from committing itself to assist whatever remains of the Iranian nuclear programme once fuel cycle-related activity is excluded, all the E3 was willing to promise was “not to impede participation in open competitive bidding.” Not surprisingly, the Iranians said this manifest demonstration of bad faith on the E3’s part meant negotiations had come to an end. Accordingly, Teheran ended its voluntary suspension and notified the International Atomic Energy Agency of its intention to resume conversion activities at its Esfahan facility. This, in short, is the

backstory to the current crisis

In an analysis of the E3 offer, [Paul Ingram of the British American Security Information Council \(BASIC\)](#) — a leading Western arms control think-tank — called it “vague on incentives and heavy on demands” and concluded that the European proposals seemed “designed to fit closely with US requirements.” “Even the establishment of a buffer store of nuclear fuel is proposed to be physically located in a third country, rather than in Iran under safeguards,” he noted, adding that the E3/EU “do not seem to have had the courage to offer either the substantial, detailed incentives or a creative, compromise solution on enrichment which could reasonably have been expected to receive Iran’s endorsement.”

Pellaud proposals

Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took one step towards a creative solution when he proposed running Iranian enrichment facilities as joint ventures with private and public sector companies from other countries. Though it has been dismissed out of hand, the latest Iranian offer is a variant of a formula that [was proposed in February this year by an IAEA expert group](#) on “multilateral approaches” to the nuclear fuel cycle headed by Bruno Pellaud.

The Pellaud committee had been tasked by the IAEA to recommend measures that could bridge the gap between a country’s right — under the NPT — to the nuclear fuel cycle, and the proliferation concerns that would arise from an increase in the worldwide number of facilities capable of uranium enrichment or plutonium separation. The relevance of this issue to the Iran question hardly needs elaboration.

Of the five proposals made by the committee, three concerned different types of international fuel supply guarantees as an incentive for countries to forswear their own enrichment facilities, and two were based on the notion of shared ownership or control. The latter involved “promoting voluntary conversion of existing facilities to multilateral nuclear approaches (MNAs), and pursuing them as confidence-building measures with the participation of non-nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-weapon states, and non-NPT states” — precisely the kind of offer Mr. Ahmadinejad made in his speech to the U.N. General Assembly last week — or “creating, through voluntary agreements and contracts, multinational, and in particular regional, MNAs for new facilities based on joint ownership, drawing rights or co-management.”

Could an MNA provide the international community with the kind of assurances it needs that enriched uranium would not be diverted to a clandestine nuclear weapons programme? While releasing his report earlier this year, Dr. Pellaud said he believed it could. “A joint nuclear facility with multinational staff puts all participants under a greater scrutiny from peers and partners, a fact that strengthens non-proliferation and security ... [It’s difficult to play games if you have multinationals at a site.](#)”

Instead of threatening sanctions, the E3 should engage Iran in a dialogue which can develop the Pellaud-Ahmadinejad proposals to a level where Teheran can provide “objective guarantees” that its programme is entirely peaceful and Europe can give “firm guarantees” and “firm commitments” on the issues which concern the Iranians. The only problem, of course, would be what to do about the Americans.

The fact of the matter is that it is impossible to separate the present “nuclear crisis” from

Washington's track record of unremitting hostility towards the Iranian Government. Indeed, any solution that does not bring about a change in U.S. behaviour is unlikely to be acceptable or durable as far as Teheran is concerned. As part of its long-term framework proposals, therefore, the E3 must undertake to get the U.S. to abandon its sanctions against the Iranian oil and gas industry and drop its aim of bringing about 'regime change' in Iran.

Instead of falling in line with Washington's pressure on Iran, Europe and the rest of the world should also ask themselves whether the cause of international peace and security is served by selective concern about 'proliferation.' The NPT allows enrichment but Iran is being told it cannot have a fuel cycle. The NPT mandates nuclear disarmament but the U.S. is conducting weapons research and formulating military doctrines that will weaponise space and increase the salience of nuclear weapons in its force posture. Britain and France have no conceivable nuclear adversaries yet continue to deploy nuclear weapons. Countries in West Asia are being told they can never walk out of the NPT but nothing is done to denuclearise Israel. These issues too are very much part of the "nuclear crisis" and it is time something were done to address them.

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