

POLITICS: Reading Solana in Tehran

Analysis by Trita Parsi*

WASHINGTON, Jul 7 (IPS) - Conciliatory noises from Tehran over the nuclear issue have left Washington and Brussels baffled, and unconvinced of Iran's intentions. Having grown accustomed to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's uncompromising language, Tehran's new tone has raised more suspicion than hope among cynics in Western capitals.

At a lunch with a dozen U.S. journalists in New York last week, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki indicated that Iran would likely respond favourably to the latest proposal by the Security Council's permanent members plus Germany (P5+1). The reason seems to be that alongside an incentive package that didn't differ significantly from a 2006 package that Tehran rejected, a formula may have been agreed upon that would enable all parties to come to the negotiating table without losing face.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana presented the formula orally to the Iranians: For a period of six weeks, Iran would halt any advancement in its enrichment activities while the Security Council would refrain from imposing additional sanctions on Iran. During this period, the Europeans and Iran would negotiate an agreement on the modalities of a full suspension, after which the United States would formally join the talks. This way, Tehran can claim that it didn't suspend as a precondition, but rather as a result of talks, and Washington can claim that it did not join talks until Iran had suspended all enrichment activities.

This formula is not new, however. Why -- and whether -- Iran would agree to it now has become the subject of much speculation. In typical fashion, Iran has sent contradictory signals. Iran's foreign minister struck an uncharacteristically conciliatory tone in New York, refusing to repeat Tehran's mantra that enrichment is non-negotiable. Days before, former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati argued in favour of negotiations in an interview to the conservative daily, Jomhuriye Eslami.

As a senior advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, Velayati's words carry particular weight. Not only did Velayati reassert Khamenei's dominion over Iranian foreign policy-making, he indirectly rebuked Ahmadinejad for his radical stance and argued that Iran should negotiate since it had won de facto recognition for its right to enrich. Iran would negotiate from a position of strength, unlike other regional powers that had negotiated out of weakness and had been humiliated by the West accordingly. And since the George W. Bush administration didn't want Iran to respond favourably to the P5+1 proposal, Iran should engage in diplomacy and show the international community that it was not the obstacle to peace, in Velayati's view.

On the other hand, government spokesperson Gholamhossein Elham dampened hopes of a

breakthrough by publicly rejecting a freeze on Iran's nuclear activities, asserting that negotiations should take place without Iran agreeing to Solana's formula. According to early reports, Iran's formal response to Solana seemed to have been in line with Elham's -- and not Velayati or Mottaki's -- statements.

Reactions in the West have varied from scepticism to outright suspicion. Tehran is either putting on a nicer face to win time or it has recognised the dangers of an Israeli attack and is showing greater flexibility as a direct result of the Jewish state's muscle flexing. Tehran only responds to force (or threats of force) and the imposition of new sanctions by the EU combined with Israeli bluster has proven that point, the argument reads.

While Iran certainly may be playing for time -- reducing tensions tactically while awaiting the Bush administration's exit from the U.S. political scene could help outmanoeuvre any effort by Washington to push for additional measures against Iran -- the idea that Iran is responding to the threat of force remains, at best, an incomplete explanation of the latest developments.

If the threat of force has caused the Iranians to bend, then it remains a mystery as to why Tehran didn't succumb two years ago when it was more vulnerable and the credibility of the threat was greater. Today, oil prices are twice as high as they were in 2006, the Bush administration's credibility is at an all time low, the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate has made military strikes more complicated politically, and the public mood in the United States -- even among supporters of John McCain -- is in favour of diplomacy.

If Velayati's words are to be taken at face value, then confidence rather than fear may have been a more important factor in the prospective Iranian decision.

The debate in Tehran over this issue seems to have centred on whether to continue defying the Security Council or to consolidate Iranian gains. Those favouring the latter have likely realised the Bush administration itself has helped make Iranian defiance successful. Critics argue that the Bush team's lack of credibility and incompetence has made it more difficult to assemble a strong international coalition against Iran. Washington's soft power with the EU under Bush has been negligible, forcing the president to strong-arm his European allies to go along with more stringent economic measures against Iran.

But with President Bush out of the picture by January 2009, the utility and risk of the Ahmadinejad line can change dramatically. Whether it is Barack Obama or John McCain, the next commander in chief will begin his presidency with significantly higher cachet with the Europeans. The hunger for strengthening trans-Atlantic ties and putting the past eight years of bickering behind them is palpable in Europe. One European diplomat indicated to IPS that Europe would even willingly go along with all the measures Bush has called for -- as long as they are consulted by the next president.

In addition, Washington could enjoy much greater pull with non-aligned countries, including Asian nations whose unwillingness to go along with sanctions have provided Tehran with an

economic escape route.

Consequently, greater interest in the freeze-for-freeze formula may have less to do with recent Israeli bluster and more to do with the greater political pull enjoyed by the next U.S. administration.

Furthermore, proponents of the Solana proposal in Tehran believe that a U.S.-Iran rapprochement can be achieved under the next U.S. administration if diplomacy is pursued. To facilitate the next U.S. president's decision to negotiate, however, Tehran must help improve the political atmosphere and provide the next U.S. commander-in-chief with a better starting point for diplomacy.

Initiating discussions at this stage could tie both an Obama and a McCain presidency to the diplomatic track. Whoever wins the elections will inherit a less problematic dispute and enjoy greater political maneuverability as a result. This is particularly true for Obama, since the Illinois senator's willingness to pursue diplomacy may not match his political ability to do so if the nuclear deadlock persists.

Mottaki may have alluded to just that in his interview with CNN yesterday. "We hear new voices in America... and we think that the rational thinkers in America can, based on these new approaches, seek reality as it is. We are ready to help them in this endeavour," Mottaki told CNN.

Whether proponents of dialogue in Tehran and Washington can initiate a process of mutual reinforcement remains to be seen. Even if Tehran agrees to the freeze-for-freeze formula, the Iranians will likely only agree to a full suspension if it isn't open-ended, isn't tied to the continuation of talks but progress in talks, and if the aim of the diplomacy is to limit but not eliminate Iran's enrichment capability.

Neither Britain nor France has shown any flexibility on these central points so far. But fearing that a prospective Obama administration will do away with "self-defeating preconditions" and soften Washington's stance on enrichment, the EU might feel compelled to talk to Tehran with the next U.S. administration in mind and not the current. If so, Tehran's softer tone may drive a wedge between the U.S. and its allies -- an objective all Iranian factions agree upon.

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