

Web Memo



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Giving Iran One Last Chance

James Phillips

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's offer today to join multilateral talks with Iran over its nuclear weapons program is meant to call Iran's diplomatic bluff and mobilize international support for tough sanctions on Iran.¹ But joining the talks entails several risks. Tehran may interpret the diplomatic offer as a weakening of U.S. resolve to block Iran's drive for nuclear weapons. Or it may seek to exploit diplomatic talks to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its allies and to buy time to continue its nuclear efforts. If the U.S. is to join talks with Iran, it must first obtain ironclad guarantees from its allies that if Iran balks at negotiations or reneges on its commitments then they will immediately impose strong sanctions. Moreover, the U.S. must reach agreement with its allies on an acceptable timeframe for negotiations and the precise terms to be offered to Iran. Neglecting these steps would give Iran an opportunity to subvert the talks for its own purposes and ensure that any talks will ultimately fail to stop its nuclear program.

Iran has used on-again, off-again diplomatic negotiations with the EU-3 (Britain, France, and Germany) to forestall concerted international action regarding its violations of its legal commitments under the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

safeguards agreement. Rice alluded to Iran's past diplomatic duplicity when she stated, "In view of its previous violations of its commitments and the secret nuclear program it undertook, the Iranian regime must persuasively demonstrate that it has permanently abandoned its quest for nuclear weapons." But it is unclear how or why new Iranian promises to rule out nuclear weapons could be treated as any more credible than its past promises, which all stand broken.

While the IAEA can inspect and monitor Iran's known nuclear facilities, it cannot inspect what it cannot find. Iran could conceal nuclear weapons development in clandestine facilities, as it has done before. Even if Iran "fully and verifiably suspends its enrichment and reprocessing activities," as Secretary Rice has stipulated, there remains the risk that Tehran could continue secret nuclear efforts at undeclared facilities,

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<http://www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wml1101.cfm>

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There also is the risk that Iran may exploit

diplomatic talks to buy time to overcome technological hurdles while it staves off sanctions. The United States and its allies must have a common understanding on an acceptable timeframe for negotiations that prevents Iran from using the talks as a ruse to run out the clock and forestall sanctions.

Washington also must reach an agreement with its allies on the incentives and disincentives to be presented to Iran. Otherwise, Iran will seek to focus the negotiations on increasing the number of carrots to exploit differences between the allies and focus blame on the United States if the talks fail, as is likely.

If Iran continues on its present path, Rice's diplomatic strategy could work only if the United States has ironclad commitments from its European allies and Japan to impose strong sanctions, outside the U.N. framework, if continued Russian and Chinese foot-dragging makes that necessary. While Rice hopes to force Iran to choose between international sanctions and its nuclear weapons efforts, Moscow and Beijing will seek to help their Iranian friends to escape strong U.N. sanctions.

If Iran rejects the talks, then Russia and China might be embarrassed into accepting stronger sanctions than they would permit otherwise. But such diluted sanctions are unlikely to be decisive in ending Iran's longstanding efforts to attain nuclear weapons. Only if the U.S., Europe, Japan, and other allies present a determined and united front in support of strong economic sanctions will they have a chance of dissuading Iran from continuing its nuclear efforts, short of war.

And if Iran accepts U.S. conditions for proposed talks, Washington must be clear that this is a last ditch diplomatic effort that will not be followed by sweetened diplomatic offers in the future. Iran must not be allowed to drag out the negotiations

or play the Europeans off against the United States. And the Europeans must commit to finally imposing sanctions if Iran backs out of the talks or is caught cheating again.

James Phillips is Research Fellow in Middle Eastern Studies in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

¹ Link to Rice press conference.

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/67088.htm>