



# policy brief

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## The smarter U.S. option: a full summit with Iran

**George A. Lopez and David Cortright**

The escalating crisis between Iran and the United States belongs on the bilateral summit table, not at the United Nations Security Council. This is true even if Iran rejects the current multilateral incentive package of the big powers. Months of threats and brinkmanship by both nations illustrate the need for face-to-face, behind-closed-doors diplomacy. The acrimony and posturing that greeted the recent letter sent by Iranian President Ahmadinejad to President George Bush reinforce the need for summit discussions of a broad range of issues.

On May 31, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice indicated that the Bush Administration was willing to hold talks with the Iranians alongside our European allies provided that Iran first suspend its enrichment of uranium. However progressive the U.S. initiative may appear, for *this* crisis with *this* foe, the overture falls short for two reasons.

First, the tone and direction of the invitation sets as the basic precondition for direct talks with the United States precisely that which the Iranians seek to negotiate with the Americans, namely, their right to enrich uranium under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Second, the issues facing Iran and the United States extend far beyond this enrichment controversy. They include support for terrorism, a stable future for Iraq, trade, energy needs, peace and security in the wider Middle East, and the prospect of normalized diplomatic relations. This constellation of concerns provides the classic conditions for a meaningful and potentially far-reaching summit. To limit the discussion only to uranium enrichment, and to demand concessions on that issue as a prerequisite for discussion, is short-sighted.

Until recently, it appeared logical for the United States to pursue its non-proliferation objectives through the incentive-based diplomacy managed by our European allies. The “carrots” portion of the new offer to Iran does appear creative and substantial. However, because this approach is also buttressed by the threat to

impose UN sanctions on Iran if it does not accept the deal, the United States undermines the proposal's persuasive power. Unfortunately, such punitive sanctions will complicate rather than resolve the crisis. Overcoming Iranian intransigence requires calibrated, pro-active, and direct U.S. engagement with Iran. Without that, no incentive package, however clever or lucrative, will succeed.

### **Why sanctions, isolation and punishment won't work**

Lessons from past UN sanctions cases predict very low likelihood of success in getting Security Council approval soon for sanctions. The council only adopts Chapter VII sanctions of the kind that the United States seeks when there is complete agreement that a major offense against international law or norms has occurred. While many nations acknowledge Iran's deception of the International Atomic Energy Agency

Because Ahmadinejad is using nuclear brinkmanship to improve Iran's international position and to coalesce political power, he will also claim that sanctions confirm the existence of a Western conspiracy to stifle Iran's energy independence. Thus UN sanctions will indirectly strengthen Iran's hard-line political groups, while undermining the position of Iranians favoring compromise with the West.

If the Security Council were to impose sanctions on Iran, it likely would resort to targeted, smart sanctions on the finances, travel, and goods of selected individuals and economic actors. Unfortunately, the Iranians have moved a considerable amount of their money out of foreign banks and into domestic institutions, beyond the reach of such sanctions.

Smart sanctions work best when they are astutely mixed with economic and political incentives

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(IAEA) in the 1990s regarding its nuclear activities, they acknowledge that in doing so Iran violated its promise to be transparent about its nuclear program, but it has not violated the NPT. Still other states reject the claim that Iran has attained either an enrichment threshold or a near-term weapons capability that warrants the current crisis designation.

However disagreeable Bush Administration officials consider this assessment, it is today's political reality. So, too, is the harsh truth that nearly 27 years of heavy sanctions imposed directly by the United States have not prevented Iran from proceeding with its nuclear program. Thus, the imperative for a new approach — marked by engaging Iran as an equal, not isolating it as a pariah — could not be clearer.

Even if the United States could achieve Security Council agreement, potential land mines could sabotage the effectiveness of a punishing sanctions policy against Iran. Much like Yugoslavia's Milosevic or Liberia's Charles Taylor, the inflammatory Iranian President Ahmadinejad fits the profile of a regime leader who would mobilize a domestic "rally around the flag" response to sanctions.

dispensed by key UN member states. Imposers must think carrots *and* sticks. The nation holding the most carrots capable of altering the Ahmadinejad government's varied positions and concerns is the United States. So why not meet with the Iranians in a summit without preconditions?

### **Incentives only the United States can offer**

Critics of a summit will emphasize that the Europeans attempted to bargain directly with Tehran for years and failed. Why should the United States try again? Moreover, if Tehran rejects the recent U.S. offer, why would the United States reward Iranian stubbornness with new and more beneficial offers to talk?

First, such claims fail to acknowledge that the European effort did produce intrusive, albeit temporary, International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring, and led Iran to suspend its enrichment program for two years. To reinstate this *status quo ante* could be one achievable goal of a U.S.-Iranian meeting.

Second, the new and more serious contours of this crisis demonstrate that the central disputants are, and always have been, Iran and the United States. America alone holds more bargaining leverage with Iran than the European countries and the UN combined. And the range of incentives is staggering indeed:

- Washington could ease its comprehensive trade sanctions against Iran in ways that benefit social sectors most likely to encourage cooperation with the West.
- As happened with Libya, the normalization of U.S.-Iran relations in exchange for guarantees of Iranian compliance with non-proliferation norms and renunciation of support for terrorism could be on the table.
- The United States might even offer a phased release of the estimated \$17 billion in Iranian assets that has remained frozen in U.S. banks since 1979.
- By far the largest carrot available would be a formal U.S. pledge to refrain from military action against Iran, as part of a binding non-proliferation agreement. Security assurances are the key to preventing proliferation and would dramatically alter Iran's security calculus. But this ultimate incentive only comes with international inspections to confirm that Iran's enrichment is for energy needs alone.

The Bush administration has not treated seriously the potential benefits of a summit with Iran. In mid-May, Henry Kissinger did broach the subject when he argued in an extensive *Washington Post* opinion piece that the United States must pursue more direct talks with the Iranians around a multi-party negotiating table, much like what has now developed.

But a stronger case for a multi-issue, bilateral summit now exists. On the uranium and nuclear issue, the dynamics of a summit require that each delegation bring a sizeable contingent of experts. This will result in an Iranian delegation of scientists and technocrats who are less interested in religious rhetoric and more in the resolution of the differences between Iranian interests in energy production and bomb development. A serious summit could produce on-going working groups to continue discussions in this problem area. And this process is more likely to lead

to successful long term nuclear control than a pre-summit suspension of enrichment.

In dealing with the issue of terrorist groups, both sides have claims on the other, with the United States clearly having the stronger and more historic case. The United States might ease the growing tensions created in the Kurdish regions by the attacks of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) against Iranian targets in exchange for Iranian renunciation of support for groups attacking Israel. Border security and internal stability in Iraq demand detailed discussion between the two parties to which a summit can give new momentum.

Lurking in the background is the U.S. concern about whether Iran would accept a wider Mideast peace that, of course, would involve agreements about Israel. This set of issues need not be addressed in this summit, nor could it be before other issues are engaged and resolved. But the United States will never get to these critical concerns pursuing its current confrontational course on the narrow issue of uranium enrichment.

### **Ahmadinejad's letter and Rice's proposed meeting as key openings**

Some critics believe that a summit with Iran on equal terms and without preconditions is too generous an offer to an outlaw regime with a crazed president. They point to the controversial and unwelcome letter sent by President Ahmadinejad in early May as evidence that a summit would be a fool's errand. And the rejection of Washington's overture to meet once enrichment is suspended

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will be taken as indicative of Tehran's gruesome intentions to produce a bomb.

But to reject the idea of a summit is to narrow America's future options. If the United States insists on imposing sanctions, which it knows some Security Council members will not support, the administration will feel compelled to push ahead with punishment and isolation of Iran, a strategy that can only be enforced by military measures.

Rather than trapping ourselves in this security dilemma, we must engage in the boldest kind of pre-emptive diplomacy by calling for a high-level meeting in which a wide range of issues separating the United States and Iran are on the table. To assure its success, the administration must mobilize considerable diplomatic energy and bargaining expertise.

President Bush can score significant diplomatic and public relations gains by calling for a summit with the Muslim leader of the nation the United States has declared its No. 1 security concern. As was the case with Cold War meetings with our Soviet enemy, little is to be lost and much may be gained from direct dialogue without preconditions. At the least, more focused articulation of and bargaining over each nation's underlying security interests might produce yet unforeseen ways to resolve the nuclear standoff.

Finally, a direct summit strategy gives meaning to a calculated decision to take the military option off the table as the ultimate incentive with which to challenge the Iranians. Left only with mid-range and long-distance carrots and sticks conveyed to Iran through a multilateral dialogue, it may be understandable why President Bush would refrain from closing off the use of force. But in direct talks, a non-aggression pledge from the United States provides the ultimate bargaining chip to exchange for Iranian agreement to international inspections, enrichment suspension, and acceptance of its energy needs being met by a multilateral coalition of suppliers of clean nuclear fuel.

The goal of a de-nuclearized Iran cannot be achieved with sanctions, saber-rattling or military force. Nor will these strategies lead to an Iran that is friendlier to U.S. interests, or help create an Iran that is a more constructive actor for peace and stability in its neighborhood. Now is the time for the United States to be a mature world leader, confident about the substantial persuasive power it holds and the goals it seeks. It is time to invite Iran to a full and wide-ranging summit.



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