



Iran's nukes, Europe's follies

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Treating Iran's alleged nuclear ambition as a hot potato, the European trio of Britain, Germany and France has decided to pass it on to the International Atomic Energy Agency and thence to the United Nations' Security Council. "Our talks with Iran have reached a dead end," says Germany's new Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

In truth, however, the trio's three-year talks with Iran *started* at a dead end.

The talks began when Iran admitted that it had been lying to the International Atomic Energy Agency and violating the terms of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) for 18 years but promised not to do so again.

Legally speaking, Iran should have been referred to the Security Council at that time. But the Europeans rejected U.S. demands to that effect and decided to forgive Iran for its past sins — much as a deceived spouse

might show magnanimity toward a sinning partner.

In exchange, they asked Iran — as then French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin put it — to give them "something with which to silence the Americans."

De Villepin had devised the scheme as a means of exposing what he called "the follies of American policy"; Iran could be dealt with "the French way," meaning negotiations and compromise rather than knuckle-rapping or worse.

The Iranians had good reason to welcome the European offer. It removed the serious-seeming threat of military action, while isolating the United States. And it gave Tehran time to speed up its nuclear program.

The Iranians were honest throughout: They said they were prepared to give that "something" needed "to silence

the Americans" in the form of a voluntary and temporary suspension of uranium-enrichment activities. They *did not* promise a permanent ban. Nor would they relinquish Iran's right, under the NPT, to enrich uranium for fuel.

The European trio was deceived by *its own illusions*, not Iranian chicanery. All it was interested in was to score a point against Washington. Even now, the trio is not asking Iran to permanently forgo its right to enrich uranium.

And now the trio must negotiate with a much tougher Iranian: President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has called the Europeans "nothing but corrupt midgets." He is also convinced that the United States has missed the opportunity to use the threat of military action against Iran.

As a result, Ahmadinejad is actively seeking a diplomatic confrontation with the Europeans and escalating tension with the Americans. He believes that he can take on both and win – and hopes to thereby emerge as the unrivaled master of the Islamic Republic and *de facto* leader of the Muslim world.

The Europeans are not prepared to acknowledge that the problem is not uranium enrichment but the nature of the Iranian regime. More than 20 countries, from Argentina to Ukraine, enrich uranium without anyone making a fuss. But who can trust the present leadership in Tehran not to embark upon some tragic mischief in the name of its ideology?

European-style appeasement has encouraged Tehran's most radical faction, helping bring Ahmadinejad to power. All the diplomatic gesticulations to follow will only compound that effect.

The Islamic Republic has had three years to prepare for whatever sanctions the Security Council might impose. It has also signed \$70 billion in oil and gas contracts with China and \$30 billion in arms and industrial contracts with Russia, ensuring that one or both would veto any harsh resolution against Iran.

This is one of those regimes that will not stop until they hit something hard. Why should they, when they can pursue their objectives cost-free? Soft power may work – *if* it is backed by hard power. Yet Europe has, once again, made it clear that it would oppose even the *threat* of hard power.

As things stand, all those concerned in this carnival of absurdities have reason to be happy: The Europeans get rid of the hot potato, the Bush administration finds a diplomatic fig-leaf to cover its lack of an Iran policy, the Russians sell their arms, the Chinese get their oil and gas and the Islamists in Tehran accelerate whatever mischief they might be up to in the nuclear domain.

But the problem remains unresolved. Down the road, the West may well find that it would have to use far more than the mere threat of hard power to restrain Tehran's messianic ambitions – a much costlier bill than would have been the case three years ago.

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