

Iran Nuclear Brief: Charting a Diplomatic Path On the Iran Nuclear Challenge

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By Peter Grail

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Charting a Diplomatic Path On the Iran Nuclear Challenge

Even as tensions over Iran's nuclear program rise, the principal parties engaged in the issue say that they seek a peaceful resolution through diplomacy. Earlier this month, Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili reportedly sent a letter to European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton—who represents the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States)—in response to the six-country offer for the renewal of serious talks on Iran's nuclear program. With the P5+1 insisting that a diplomatic path to resolve the issue remains open and Tehran's professed interest in dialogue, the question arises: what steps could the two sides take to resolve the impasse?

In her letter to Jalili last October calling for renewed negotiations, Ashton said the process would need to begin with confidence-building measures to facilitate longer-term engagement. Given the current trust deficit and the inability of the fractured Iranian political leadership to agree on whether and how to engage on the nuclear issue, an approach that builds upon short-term arrangements makes sense. But it will also be necessary to have some idea of what the end-goal of such engagement might be.

In this respect, Ashton said in her letter that the goal of the six countries is "a comprehensive negotiated, long-term solution which restores international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme," reaffirming the group's commitment to proposals it put forward 2006 and 2008. This brief provides an overview of these proposals and related confidence-building steps and discusses how they address the critical issue of Iran's enrichment program.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Diplomacy is critical to determine whether or not Iran is serious about its interest in dialogue.
- Current efforts to strengthen sanctions—aimed at changing Tehran's behavior—would not be as effective without any effort to gauge whether or not Tehran was willing to compromise and offer it a chance to do so.
- Ending Iran's enrichment to 20% is a near-term priority. Some Iranian officials have indicated they could stop if Iran receives fuel for the TRR. There is no harm, and significant potential gain, from testing this idea in talks.
- The requirement for Iran to suspend enrichment is a confidence-building measure, not a permanent condition. Any potential long-term negotiated outcome will entail continued but constrained and closely monitored enrichment in Iran.
- Although some P5+1 members have been unwilling to acknowledge this publicly, it is a feature in the group's proposal to Iran, which includes a review mechanism to determine when the suspension of enrichment might be lifted.
- Iran's unwillingness to accept such a proposal suggests that Tehran is concerned that, even if it is allowed to keep enrichment, the additional monitoring required in such an agreement would make it far more difficult to use its enrichment program for weapons.
- Renewed, serious P5+1 talks with Iran do not allow Iran to "run out the clock." Rather, the failure to resume talks and achieve progress on the nuclear issue only increases the risk that Iran may use its nuclear program for weapons purposes.

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