

Handle Iran with care

The Turkey-Brazil initiative on Iran's nuclear programme and Iran's acceptance has been widely welcomed as a step towards an eventual peaceful resolution of the issue. While it still leaves many issues open, it opens up tracks for further negotiations. Of course, there are many, especially in Israel and the US, who doubt Iran's intentions. Is Iran playing for time while it builds up its nuclear capability?

The US administration thinks so and is still determined to push through a sanctions resolution in the UN Security Council, followed by unilateral measures. Such a step would be imprudent and could have far-reaching consequences, not all desirable even to the US. In its eagerness to get Russian support for sanctions, the US administration on May 21 dropped sanctions on several Russian entities accused of transfer of defence related technology or equipment to Iran and Syria.

Waiting in the wings is an aggressive US sanctions Bill, promoted by hardliners in the US Congress and the Israeli lobby, with threats of applying it extraterritorially to third country companies — a move that will ignite economic disputes with several countries. Understandably, the Obama administration feels pressured to make some tough moves against Iran, keeping the November Congressional elections in mind.

HOPE AMIDST TENSIONS

The US administration has ordered a big naval build-up near the Persian Gulf. A strike force led by the nuclear carrier *USS Truman* with a force of 6,000 marines left Norfolk on May 21 for the region, to join the *USS Eisenhower* carrier group already off the Iranian coast. Four more US warships are headed to the region.

Iran has just carried out one of its biggest military exercises. The eight-day war game, dubbed "The Last Prophet" covered a 250,000-kilometre area from the strategic Hormuz Strait to the Gulf of Aden, with the accent for the first time on the Indian Ocean. Russian supply of sophisticated S-300 air defence systems to Iran is also under way. All

The Turkey-Brazil initiative to reduce the trust deficit between Iran and the rest of the world should be given a chance. The US should desist from imposing sanctions on Iran for its nuclear programme, as that would only escalate tensions in the region, says BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN.



Iran's Bushehr nuclear reactor...The latest deal places 1200 kg of low enriched uranium from Iran under international control.

these developments signal an escalation of tensions in the region.

The latest deal, brokered by Turkey and Brazil, removes 1200 kg of low enriched uranium and places it under international control, in exchange for which Iran would get 250 kg of 20 per cent enriched uranium fuel for its research reactor. Some argue that Iran still would have substantial stocks of LEU and enrichment capacity to break out of the NPT and go nuclear if it wished. There are several issues that Iran has not clarified to the IAEA.

However, this deal reduces to some extent the deficit in confidence between Iran and the international community and gives time for further negotiations on arrangements for providing Iran with nuclear fuel for peaceful purposes, to which it is entitled under the NPT. It also gives time for further dia-

logue between Iran and the IAEA over any unresolved technical issues. Along both these tracks, there is scope for negotiations to move forward.

SANCTIONS CAN BACKFIRE

Imposing sanctions at this stage would destroy any hope of progress. There would be deep divisions in the international community. The UN Security Council would once again be seen as acting in the narrow interests of a few major powers, with double standards, further eroding its credibility and legitimacy. The Non-Aligned Movement and the Islamic group would provide Iran with solidarity and support, rendering any effort to isolate it fruitless.

Efforts to enforce sanctions would lead to rising tensions in the region, already bedevilled with

many intractable issues involving Israel, Palestine, and perceived threats from Israel's nuclear capability. It is unlikely that Iran's neighbours such as Turkey would enforce sanctions with any degree of enthusiasm, especially if it is seen as part of a US diktat. The US position in Afghanistan and Iraq would become even more difficult in the event of a conflict with Iran. Iran and its allies could activate Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon causing serious problems in the Middle East peace process.

Possible threats to world oil movement through the Persian Gulf would drive up oil prices, and destabilise markets, aggravating an already difficult situation caused by the Euro crisis. The incident of the South Korean ship sinking shows how it could be possible to deniably sink a large ship in the Straits of

Hormuz channel, restricting movement of large tankers. The political fall-out of imposing sanctions on an Islamic country, while at the same time failing to curb Israel's annexationist settlement activities, would further alienate the Islamic world, and cause problems for moderate Arab regimes.

BE PATIENT WITH IRAN

Sanctions could provide Iran with a good excuse to exit from the NPT, release itself of obligations, and go nuclear as rapidly as possible. The very purpose of sanctions would be frustrated if Iran ends up with a stronger nuclear programme and a robust and defiant economy.

For all these reasons, the Obama administration has been cautious and patient so far in dealing with the Iran issue. It would be well advised not to push on with UN Security Council sanctions or unilateral sanctions at this stage, when the Turkish-Brazilian initiative has secured an important albeit an incomplete breakthrough. If Iran does not cooperate with taking the Turkish-Brazilian initiative forward, the threat of stronger future sanctions would be more effective rather than weaker sanctions now, in persuading Iran to make more concessions.

As for Iran's nuclear programme, the regime evidently attaches great importance to maintaining an independent enrichment capability. The doubts over its intention to seek nuclear weapons remains, especially in the wake of former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati's recent disclosures of purchase of centrifuges and nuclear weapons designs from A.Q. Khan's organisation. Under the circumstances, it would be unrealistic to aim for the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear fuel programme.

A better option would be to bring as much of Iran's nuclear fuel capability under safeguards and monitoring. The regime needs to be assured that its best interests are served by cooperating with the international community, rather than seeking a crusading Islamic militant role.

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