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How to End the Stalemate With Iran

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THE stunning election of a pragmatic former Iranian nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rowhani, has offered the Obama administration a once-in-a-lifetime chance to end the atomic stalemate with Iran.

In the West, Mr. Rowhani is widely seen as a turbaned politico from inside the establishment. One of us has worked for him directly, as his deputy in nuclear talks. The other has conducted research at the think tank he runs. We can attest that he is wary of a purely ideological approach to foreign policy and is driven by more than simple expediency in pursuit of the national interest. After seeing the nuclear deal he was attempting to negotiate with the European Union fall apart in 2005, Mr. Rowhani is now seeking to resolve the nuclear issue once and for all, and also to redeem himself politically.

Mr. Rowhani's victory demonstrates that there is now real momentum toward the initiation of direct talks between Iran and the United States. Despite remarks he has made to appease hard-liners since his victory, Mr. Rowhani's campaign rhetoric made clear his desire to change the hostile relationship with America. In recent months, even Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has given permission for direct negotiation — although he has not expressed optimism about its prospects.

The single biggest threat to this unique window for dialogue is misguided perceptions of each side's respective strengths and weaknesses. To avoid squandering this opportunity, President Obama and President-elect Rowhani, who takes office in August, must resist and debunk the false impressions that

have been promoted by extremists on both sides.

In Washington, some have started portraying Mr. Rowhani's election as proof that America's current approach, which relies on tough sanctions, is working. The perception is that the Iranians are willing to budge on their nuclear rights, and that the centrist president-elect — who once agreed to temporarily and voluntarily suspend uranium enrichment — will make unreciprocated concessions. According to this theory, a weakened Iran, hungry for an imminent end to hard-hitting sanctions, will take what it can get. This view implicitly promotes the dangerous idea that the United States should retain or even stiffen its rigid nuclear posture.

In Tehran, there is a sense of optimism about the nuclear issue that derives from a tenuous narrative of Iranian resurgence. For years, there has been a systemic reluctance to engage in substantive negotiations, unless Iran is operating from a position of strength. Now a new president has won a clear popular mandate after eight years of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's divisive rule. As a result, there is a growing perception that Iran has the long-sought upper hand.

Indeed, many view Mr. Rowhani's background as the supreme leader's longtime personal representative to the Supreme National Security Council as evidence of a new era of national cohesion. This perception of strength could spur Iran to seriously enter nuclear negotiations. But overconfidence could also lead Iran's rulers to avoid making the concessions necessary to break the stalemate.

When two rivals walk into a room, each convinced that he has the upper hand, it can end only in disaster. These diametrically opposed perceptions of the meaning of Mr. Rowhani's election have the potential to torpedo this unique opportunity for a deal.

Worryingly, the West has a history of squandering chances to strike a deal

with Mr. Rowhani. He has publicly suggested that one route out of the nuclear stalemate is the torpedoed 2005 proposal he negotiated with Jacques Chirac, France's president at the time. Under that plan, Western powers would recognize Iran's legitimate rights under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, including uranium enrichment for civilian purposes like nuclear energy and medical research.

In exchange, Iran would accept the International Atomic Energy Agency's definition of "objective guarantees" that the Iranian nuclear program will remain peaceful and not be diverted toward weaponization in the future. That proposal fell apart because of pressure from the George W. Bush administration, which insisted on no enrichment at all.

Eight years after the collapse of dialogue with the European Union, the dominant discourse in Tehran still portrays Mr. Rowhani's recommendation to suspend enrichment on a voluntary, temporary basis as a failure because it resulted only in humiliating calls for an indefinite suspension of all enrichment.

But Iran's relinquishing of its legitimate rights under the N.P.T., including enrichment, isn't, and has never been, on the table. However, Iranian leaders are open to new measures that would permanently allay Western concerns about Iran's nuclear program.

Indeed, the contours of a final nuclear deal are clear. Iran will have to agree to the highest level of transparency and cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency and assure world powers that its nuclear program will never be diverted toward weaponization. In exchange, the West will have to recognize Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology, including enrichment, and gradually lift sanctions.

Sooner rather than later, Iran and the United States will engage with each other. The main obstacle to a final deal is no longer its terms, but the path to

reaching such an accord. Mr. Rowhani and Mr. Obama must stick to pragmatism and fend off extremism. They must combine prudence with courage and take reciprocal, rationally sequenced steps, and then follow through with hard sells at home. And most of all, they must avoid embracing the misperceptions of strength and weakness that have brought us to the brink.

After decades of fruitless confrontation, both the United States and Iran need cooperation.

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