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## **Obama must offer a 'grand deal' with Iran on its nuclear program**

The current trajectory is headed toward a violent endgame, writes this former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiators. The Obama administration needs a new engagement policy with Iran that brings an end to 33 years of a failed 'diplomacy plus pressure' policy dubbed as 'dual-track.'



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaks at a ceremony in Iran's nuclear enrichment facility in Natanz, April 9, 2007. Op-ed contributor Seyed Hossein Mousavian says it's encouraging that President Ahmadinejad 'recently stated that the now politicized dispute over Iran's nuclear program should be resolved by direct talks between Iran and the United States.'

(Hasan Sarbakhshian/AP/file)

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By Seyed Hossein Mousavian / November 28, 2012 at 1:48 pm EST

Princeton, N.J.

For Iran, the nuclear crisis has become the most important national security and foreign policy challenge since the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

The country may not be losing hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians to a hot war. But it is enduring the most severe sanctions in its history, foreign assassinations of its scientists, and international pressure that has shaken the foundation of its relations regionally, and with Western and Eastern powers. It would not be unrealistic to conclude that Iran has already paid the price for a nuclear bomb.

And yet Iran has not relinquished its uranium enrichment rights under the Non

Proliferation Treaty, and instead has become more resolute and defiant. Today it has about 10,000 nuclear centrifuges and has mastered uranium enrichment to the 20-percent grade level – defying the UN Security Council and the West by bringing its enrichment capacity to a “point of no return.”

With both sides scoring such high points, this duel could be interpreted as a win-win game, with the West squeezing Iran as never before and Iran’s nuclear program continuing on. I would suggest, however, it is really a lose-lose one, with a trajectory headed toward a violent endgame. This, though, can be avoided with a grand deal.

It’s encouraging that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently stated that the now politicized dispute over Iran’s nuclear program should be resolved by direct talks between Iran and the United States. This is a major shift in the Iranian president’s understanding.

When I visited Mr. Ahmadinejad in 2005 as a possible candidate to work for the foreign ministry, we discussed Iran-US relations and the role of the US on the nuclear file. At that time, he disagreed with my recommendation to bolster dialogue with the West – including the US – to resolve the nuclear dilemma. He saw enrichment as a technical, legal issue, a legitimate right for Iran under the Non Proliferation Treaty. I cautioned that for the West, it is neither a legal nor technical issue, but a political one, which requires direct talks with the US to be resolved.

Whether his recent comments are a matter of consensus within Iran, however, remains a big question.

Another question is whether President Obama will be able to orchestrate a “real engagement” with Iran – in contrast to his first term where he applied devastating unilateral and international sanctions, pressure, covert operations, and an intelligence war. Those measures only contributed to further tensions and a thickening of the wall of mistrust between the two nations – wiping any chance of rapprochement off the political map.

The Obama administration needs a new engagement policy with Iran that brings an end to 33 years of a failed “diplomacy plus pressure” policy dubbed as “dual-track.” The Iranian leadership values actions over words – particularly since Mr. Obama’s pleasantries have coincided with the most draconian sanctions and measures applied on Iran.

In the second term, it is time for the Obama administration to offer Iran a “grand deal,” where dual-track diplomacy is supported by constructive actions to prove his sincerity. Such a strategy needs to be drafted and implemented wisely, in both substance and style, to prevent previous failures and bring a real change to US-Iran relations. It also requires Iran to accommodate such policy by taking appropriate steps to facilitate the trend.

I cannot agree more with Obama when days after his reelection he said: “There

should be a way in which they [Iran] can enjoy peaceful nuclear power while still meeting their international obligations and providing clear assurances to the international community that they're not pursuing a nuclear weapon." The following is a roadmap to realize that goal:

The negotiating countries known as P5+1 and Iran have two immediate ways to cool down tensions and warmongering: 1) Iran can agree to halt 20-percent enrichment and cap it at 5 percent in return for partial removal of sanctions – such as European unilateral sanctions on Iranian oil and Iran's central bank; or 2) the P5+1 can get more inspections, taking advantage of Iranian legislation passed by the parliament that permits the government to implement "Additional Protocol" inspections and safeguards in return for the West recognizing Iran's legitimate right to enrichment.

If Iran and the P5+1 agreed to this second option, that would greatly ease the resolution of outstanding technical issues between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran.

A next step should be a realistic, comprehensive package for solving the nuclear standoff.

Such a package should ensure Iran's maximum level of transparency and cooperation with the IAEA and guarantee "no breakout" in Iran's nuclear program. The P5+1 should reciprocate by recognizing Iran's right to enrichment under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and gradually lift sanctions.

Simultaneously, direct talks between Iran and the US on broader issues are essential. Rapprochement will be possible only if, for the duration of engagement policy, the US dual-track policy ceases and hostile actions, sanctions, and other forms of coercive pressures are put on hold. And Tehran and Washington must also agree on a comprehensive agenda for reconciliation. That agenda must include all bilateral, regional, and international issues – demonstrating the "entire game plan" while implementing it in phases.

For instance, Iran and the US could first cooperate on Afghanistan to build trust, then move on to the Syria crisis by organizing a free election supervised by the international community.

Helpful, too, would be for both sides to dial back the language of threats and heated rhetoric and to convince political factions in both countries to support the talks – at least temporarily – while negotiations continue. Tehran and Washington will need to recognize their respective spoilers at home and abroad, and be determined to prevent them from obstructing and derailing rapprochement efforts.

The alternative to engagement will be catastrophic to international peace and security. The continuation of the economic and covert war against Iran would further radicalize its behavior and shrink the maneuverability of Iranian decisionmakers to compromise. Ultimately the US would be forced to enter a third war in the Middle East – one that would be disastrous for the US, Iran, the

region, and beyond. Therefore diplomatic progress is a *must*, not a choice.

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