

Once presidential elections are out of the way in Iran, there may be a window of opportunity for a new policy to end the thirty-year standoff with the United States.

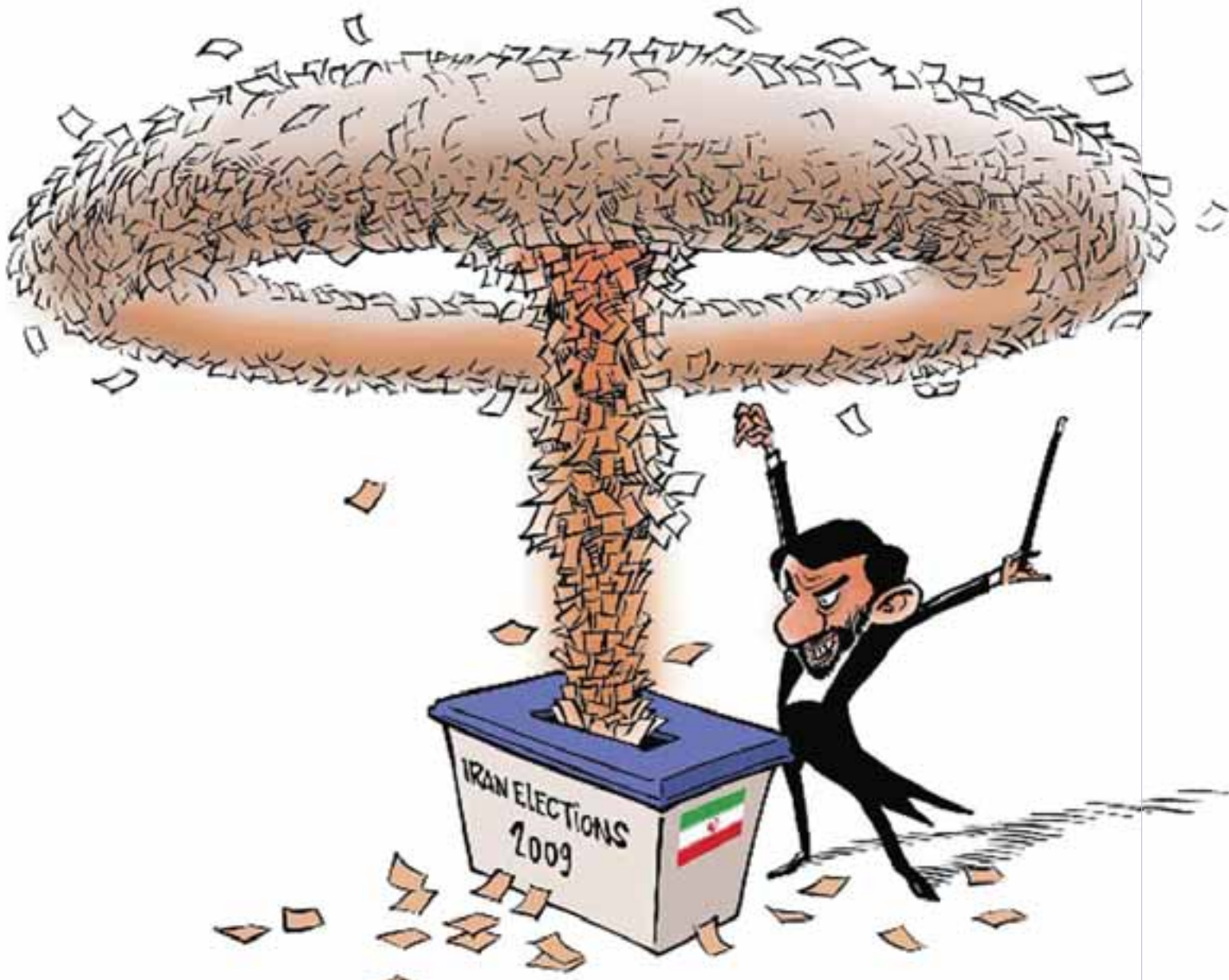
Europe negotiated with Tehran for some two years until 2005, during the longest freeze in its nuclear activities.

There are important lessons for Washington in any new initiative.

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ENGAGING IRAN: EUROPEAN LESSONS FOR AMERICA **Riccardo Alcaro**, ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI, ROME AND EUROPEAN FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY STUDIES FELLOW. INVESTIGATED EUROPEAN NEGOTIATIONS WITH IRAN AT CHATHAM HOUSE



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tHE NEW ADMINISTRATION IN WASHINGTON HAS MADE NO SECRET OF its intention to pursue the diplomatic track with Iran more resolutely and consistently than its predecessor. President Barack Obama and his team are widely expected to move from the backseat to the front in the Iran Six, the group of nations which has been trying for three years to extract credible guarantees from Iran about the solely peaceful nature of its nuclear programme.

The Six are the permanent members of the Security Council – Britain, France, China, Russia and the US – plus Germany. No details of Washington's policy have emerged yet, but everything points to it largely sticking to the twin track strategy pursued so far by the Six, which combines the offer of incentives with the incremental adoption of targeted sanctions.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with this, as the strategy, although so far

unsuccessful, is based on strong logic, which it would be unwise to sacrifice. However, the twin track strategy would work better with a measure of flexibility and this may be the only way to instil new life into the stalled negotiations with Iran.

In taking this course, the US should examine the only real negotiations Iran ever conducted over its nuclear programme: those with Britain, France, and Germany – the EU3, supported by the European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana – between late 2003 and mid-2005. Since then, there have been repeated contacts, but no actual talks. Learning from the European experience is anything but a guarantee of success, but it can help avoid the same mistakes.

UNFAZED BY THREATS

The main lesson is that Iran seems unfazed by threats. The EU3 lured Iran into negotiating by approaching it on an equal-to-equal basis and putting the emphasis on the opportunities of a re-framed long-term partnership. The talks coincided with the longest freeze of Iran's sensitive nuclear activities – notably uranium enrichment, which can be diverted to military purposes – and with the highest level of access ever for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to Tehran's nuclear facilities.

With hindsight, it could be argued that Iran aimed only at buying time, but this is disputable. In 2003 Iran felt vulnerable and calculated that accepting negotiations would test US readiness to grant it a degree of recognition, even if indirectly, through a deal struck by the Europeans.

President George Bush's administration only started to express support for EU3 action in the first part of 2005, and then half-heartedly while still constantly threatening sanctions. At that point, however, Washington was already stuck in the Iraq quagmire, and Iran came to the conclusion, not least because of the conservative turn resulting from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election as president, that defiance was more likely to pay-off than compliance.

The situation is different again today. True, Iran has kept expanding its nuclear programme, but it faces bigger challenges than in 2005. Five United Nations Security Council resolutions have condemned and lightly sanctioned its nuclear aspirations. Cash inflows from energy exports have dropped significantly following a sharp decline in oil prices. In addition, the election of Obama, who is almost as popular abroad as his predecessor was unpopular, has taken the edge off the usual Iranian criticisms of the US as an aggressive power.

MUTUAL INTERESTS

Against this backdrop, Washington should revive the EU approach: avoid explicit threats and insist on overlapping interests. For the time being, no reversal of existing sanctions or demands that Iran give verifiable guarantees of its peaceful nuclear purposes is needed. The present situation should be presented as regrettable, but nonetheless solvable through re-doubled efforts by all parties.

Washington would be better off if it kept a low profile.

Responding to every provocation – be it from Iran, or internal interest groups – is more energy-draining and politically risky than standing firm on demands while leaving the door open to talks. It should react only to major events.

The Europe experience shows that resorting to inflammatory tones has always made things worse, not least because it makes it harder for leaders to sell to domestic constituencies the necessary compromises that an eventual agreement would imply.

Washington should also develop a greater understanding of Iran's complex political system. Trying to play one faction off against the other could backfire. The leadership is not lacking in internal debates, but has shown a tendency to close ranks when exposed to outside pressure.

In early 2005, the negotiations also lost momentum because the Europeans started to calibrate their calculations on the expectation of Hashemi Rafsanjani's election as president. This was probably a mistake, and not only because Rafsanjani was resoundingly defeated by Ahmadinejad. A diplomatic offer loses credibility if it is seen to be tailored to suit just one political faction. Negotiations should be attempted, irrespective of the colour of the government in power.

Another lesson Washington can learn from Europe is that unity in the Security Council is an indispensable asset. Some, if not many, in Iran are at ease with antagonising the US, but very few favour being confronted by the United Nations. There is evidence of this in Iran's continuous attempts to stop the Security Council considering the issue and bring it to the IAEA's more technical agenda. The US should continue to handle the nuclear issue through the Iran Six. Tehran's recognition or isolation is only truly sustainable in a multilateral framework.

At the same time, Washington should take care not to repeat the Europeans' mistake of subordinating all Iranian matters to the nuclear issue. Establishing regular consultation on areas of mutual interest – like the stabilisation of Iraq and Afghanistan – could help build trust and offset the unavoidable setbacks and pauses in talks over the nuclear programme. For the same reason, it is not wise to make the link between the nuclear issue and others too rigid.

The nuclear standoff is a delicate, complex issue, the solution of which ultimately depends on the strength of Iran's resolve to get the bomb. A serious negotiating attempt could reveal whether this resolve is unshakeable.

The European negotiating experience with Iran should discourage Washington from making revolutionary changes in its approach. It does, however, support the use of both ends of the double track strategy with flexibility. You cannot offer a carrot while brandishing a stick and expect to be successful. Better to leave the stick in the corner, although clearly in sight.

Iran will enter negotiations only if it believes it can profit. Proposals and negotiators will need to be credible. The Europeans were alone and had little of substance to offer the Iranians. The US can count on full transatlantic assistance and the support of the Security Council. Besides, it has much with which to tempt Iran – from security guarantees to the lifting of sanctions.

