
Nuclear Iran, UN Security Council fail to find common ground

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The latest meeting in Shanghai of the six international mediators in the Iranian nuclear issue has been a fiasco, as suggested by the meager media reports.

The participating countries, which included five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany, failed to find common ground again. What happened?

Senator John McCain, a Republican front runner in the presidential race in the United States, could have caught a glimpse of what was happening at that meeting behind closed doors.

In last Sunday's interview with ABC, McCain emphasized his belief in the decisive role of tough sanctions for sorting out the problem of Iran's nuclear program. In other words, he suggested using tough sanctions against Tehran to force it to halt its own uranium enrichment, a program which not only aroused international concerns, but made the world suspect it was not as peaceful as Iran claimed. The senator said the sanctions have never been sufficiently tough, as the Russians blocked all efforts of Washington and the EU in the U.N. Security Council.

McCain's position in favor of toughening sanctions against Iran is no news.

Moreover, for some reason he clearly echoed the ideas considered by Russian and U.S. experts on Iranian nuclear problems who met in Moscow on April 14 as part of the Luxembourg Forum. One of the ideas voiced in Moscow was that we should either recognize Iran as a nuclear state, that is, a state that has nuclear weapons, or opt for tough sanctions, possibly complete isolation. The arguments the experts used to prove their point were also very similar to what McCain said: the Iranian economy is weak, despite the inflow of petrodollars, because it is 40% dependent on foreign refineries, and is therefore very vulnerable to economic sanctions.

Admittedly, along with discussing sanctions, the Moscow meeting also focused on investments which could be attractive for Iran and other encouragement options.

That approach is contrary to McCain's position. The participants in the six-party talks do not see eye to eye on the appropriate ratio of punishment and encouragement. Therefore, the key reason why their latest meeting was a fiasco was their failure to work out a stick and carrot policy that would suit everyone. The Russian side was possibly to blame, which McCain faithfully pointed out by saying that the Russians blocked all efforts.

In fact, the senator was right. The Russian Foreign Ministry said before the meeting that the Six should focus on developing new "positive" proposals for Iran this time. Moscow must have remembered that the latest UN resolution on Iran was accompanied by a statement of the six mediators about the possible alterations to their standpoint, "positive" for Iran. And it looks like the U.S., as well as the three major European nations (France, Germany and Britain) have not supported an interim resolution which would rule out a serious toughening of the sanctions.

The latest Resolution, No. 1803, includes a travel ban imposed on a number of Iranian nationals who are known to participate in the development of that country's nuclear program, a freeze of several Iranian companies' and banks' accounts, and a compulsory inspection of all cargoes.

Tehran was given 90 days to think, beginning on February 22. What are the chances of Iran amending its position?

Anton Khlopkov, executive director of the Center for Political Studies (PIR-Center), a Russian think tank, said at the Moscow meeting that Iranian politicians were almost unanimous about whether or not the country should carry on its nuclear energy program. They might only differ on how Iran should build its relations with other nations with regard to its nuclear dossier, and whether or not it is advisable to resort to such harsh rhetoric and demarches as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his team do.

Iran must certainly realize that the permanent Security Council members have walked into a blind alley with its nuclear dossier. On the one hand, the IAEA confirms that Iran has clarified some points about its previous nuclear activity, which the SC should see as a positive move, but on the other hand, the country is facing toughening sanctions.

It is also an open secret for Tehran that alternative solutions to the crisis are being discussed in western capitals, like at the Moscow meeting. It is for this reason that Iran is working to strengthen its position by announcing the installation of thousands of new centrifuges (Ahmadinejad's statement about 6,000 IR-2s on April 8). The country will certainly face new problems in developing its own uranium enrichment.

Admittedly, McCain's appearance on ABC is part of his presidential campaign.

The Iranian nuclear problem is one of the important issues brought up by all U.S. presidential candidates in their campaign speeches. But do his statements really reflect the White House's official position?

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