

The Commentator
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Of Iran, nukes, and ponies
By Lawrence J. Haas

Fresh off the failure of Almaty, where global negotiators again received nothing for their slavish effort to convince Tehran to abandon its nuclear pursuit, Western diplomats insisted that talks would continue.

“There is enough substance for these negotiations to continue,” a Western diplomat told Reuters this week. “I would not expect a breakdown.”

Why? Because Tehran deigned even to discuss, though it predictably rejected, a request from the “P5+1” – the five permanent Security Council members and Germany – that it stop enriching uranium to 20 percent purity (a short step to weapons grade material) and suspend work at its once-secret site at Fordo.

That request, by the way, was a sizable softening of the P5+1’s earlier demand that Tehran ship its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium out of the country and close its Fordo plant altogether.

All in all, the nuclear negotiations conjure up images of the optimist in Ronald Reagan’s tale of two boys at Christmas:

The first boy, a pessimist, gets a roomful of toys for Christmas but figures they must come with a catch; the second boy, an optimist, gets a pile of manure but figures he’ll find a pony amidst the mess.

“Following the failure of Almaty talks, the six powers are seeking to reassess their approach to persuade the Iranian side to agree,” Reuters reported. “In the coming days, the issue will come up during a meeting of foreign ministers of Group of Eight countries, which includes all the six powers except China.”

“The EU’s foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who oversees diplomatic contacts with Iran on behalf of the six nations, will also discuss plans for further engagement with Iran’s chief negotiator Saeed Jalili in the coming days.”

My goodness, how hopeful! There must be a pony – err, a nuclear deal – in here somewhere.

Never mind the obvious point, which savvier Western officials acknowledge, that talks benefit Iran, not the rest of the world, because they allow Tehran to make more progress on its nuclear program while stringing along the global community.

Never mind the equally obvious point that, while feigning enough interest in talking to tease the West, Tehran continues to flaunt its nuclear progress in a way that makes the West look – well, let's be polite – silly.

Both of these points came strikingly to light in the aftermath of the latest failed talks of this past weekend.

“Iran has already become a nuclear country and no one is capable of stealing this title,” Iran’s ever-boastful president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said this week in a ceremony to celebrate National Nuclear Technology Day, a holiday that he created in 2006 to honor Iran’s nuclear achievements.

“They caused restrictions and issued threats,” he said of the West, “thinking that the Iranian nation cannot achieve nuclear energy.” Rather than pressure Tehran, he said, “The best way for you is to cooperate with Iran.”

Beyond the boasts, Ahmadinejad also announced an expansion of Iran’s nuclear program, further widening the gulf between the regime’s intentions and the global community’s hopes of convincing it to change course.

Specifically, he announced, Iran has opened two new uranium mines and also a factory at which to make “yellowcake,” which is partially refined uranium that can be converted into nuclear fuel. The mines will provide the uranium for the yellowcake manufacturing plant, Iranian officials explained.

Iran already had mining sites and processing facilities, but the new sites and facilities – which the Associated Press described as its largest such complex – will greatly expand its ability to make nuclear progress.

Meanwhile, the International Atomic Energy Agency’s top official said this week that Iran could well be seeking nuclear weapons technology now, notwithstanding reports by Western intelligence agencies that it had suspended such work in 2003.

“We have credible information that Iran continued its activities beyond 2003,” Yukiya Amano, the IAEA’s director general, told a conference on nuclear policy in Washington. “Iran’s activities could be continuing until now,” he said, adding that he has asked Tehran for additional information.

Lest you think Iran’s announcement of nuclear progress this week just after its talks with the P5+1 ended was especially bold, it was actually par for the Iranian course; something similar happened last month.

In early March, Iran announced it was building some 3,000 advanced enrichment centrifuges for its Natanz plant.

That announcement followed the talks of late February that ended with an agreement to – what else? – keep talking.

Don't despair, though. There must be a pony in here somewhere.

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