

If at first Iran says no, try, try again By **VOLKER PERTHES**

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It is not certain that the talks scheduled to begin in Istanbul on Friday between the “P5-plus-1” group (the five permanent U.N. Security Council members — the United States, China, Britain, France and Russia — plus Germany) and Iran are really the last chance to avoid war over Iran’s nuclear program. But there is no question that the risk of military conflict increases should this round prove as fruitless as the last one in early 2011.

The conditions appear a little better this time. The European Union and the United States continue to see a — dwindling — chance to prevent Iran from achieving a military nuclear capability through negotiations and also decrease the risk of a military confrontation between Israel and Iran.

The Iranian leadership seems more interested than a year ago, for a number of reasons, to start discussions with clear goals.

The harsh sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union as well as the U.N. Security Council on Iran have started to bite, affecting most of the country’s business with the world. The Iranian leadership wants to rid itself of these sanctions at least in part. Iran has also been made to realize that threats, such as the closing of the Strait of Hormuz, have failed to deter the Americans and Europeans from imposing these sanctions.

There is also the fact that regional politics have not been going Iran’s way, even though Tehran continues to publicly celebrate the “Islamic awakening” in the Arab world. Iran faces the loss of its only strategic ally in the region, the Assad regime in Damascus, and the Arab Gulf States are actively engaged in an attempt to roll back Iran’s influence. What’s more, Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Hamas in Gaza by no means follow a pro-Iranian agenda.

Inside Iran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been badly weakened. The Iranian negotiator, Saeed Jalili, has made clear that he acts on behalf of the religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In his letter to the E.U.’s foreign affairs chief, Catherine Ashton, who heads the “P5-plus-1” group, Jalili declared that Iran was ready for the “step-by-step” approach and the “reciprocity” she proposed for the discussions.

In fact, such a gradual approach — tying the lifting or suspension of various sanctions to steps Iran must undertake — is the only chance for success. The mutual distrust is too great for any quick, comprehensive solution that would lead Iran to abandon its uranium enrichment program. But a few agreed steps could restore the minimum of trust needed for a constructive diplomatic process.

The most important breakthrough would be for Iran to agree to suspend its 20 percent uranium enrichment, ship stockpiles of such uranium to agreed locations abroad, and allow the [International Atomic Energy Agency](#) to inspect facilities that could serve to produce nuclear weapons.

The idea that Iran could swap its enriched uranium for a research reactor would likely be put on the table again. Further steps could include the ratification of the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty that gives the I.A.E.A. full inspection rights.

All these steps cannot be achieved in one round of negotiations. They would require talks over several months. But that is only feasible if both sides act constructively in the first round.

Iran will want to know what it will gain if it agrees to such an approach. The P5-plus-1 group should have a convincing answer, such as identifying which specific American or European sanctions would be suspended should Iran stop its 20 percent enrichment.

Simply promising not to impose additional sanctions does not constitute a major incentive. And a total lifting of sanctions is as unlikely today as a full halt of Iranian enrichment activities.

The P5-plus-1 negotiators should, however, be prepared to suggest what a final settlement might look like — what assurances and guarantees the international community would need in order to accept an Iranian nuclear program with limited enrichment activities.

Given the lack of elementary trust, the new talks will be fragile. There is always the risk that Iranian domestic politics will halt the process, as it did in 2009. The talks can also crash if the P5-plus-1 group fails to make clear that they are really about limiting the spread of nuclear weapons, and not about regime change in Tehran.

If the Iranian leadership is firmly convinced that the goal of the sanctions is only to weaken or overthrow its regime, why would it abandon a program that so troubles Israel and the West?

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