**The End of Nuclear Diplomacy**

The agreement of Turkey and Brazil to enrich Iran's uranium is a signal defeat for the Obama administration.

By Bret Stephens

May 18, 2010

WSJ

*http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703315404575249983860369158.html*

There's a hoary cliché about how Western diplomats are always playing checkers while their (invariably) smarter adversaries play chess. In the matter of yesterday's nuclear agreement between Iran, Turkey and Brazil the line doesn't quite work. The game Tehran is playing isn't any more complicated than checkers. The trouble is, they're whipping us at it.

As I write these lines, it isn't yet clear how the Obama administration will respond to the deal, which reportedly is similar to the one the U.S. and its allies proposed, and Iran spurned, last October. Since then, the administration has rotely insisted that the original offer stands, albeit on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. But what do you do with a deal that was spoiled milk to begin with, and is now eight months past its sell-by date?

The ostensible virtue of the original bargain is that it would have required Iran to park 1,200 kilograms of its civilian-grade, 3.5% enriched uranium—the bulk of its total stockpile—in a third country. The uranium was then to be enriched to a 20% grade, to produce medical isotopes from a small research reactor in Tehran. In the meantime, the West would have bought itself at least a year of time before Iran could make the 1,900 kilos of civilian-grade uranium needed to produce the 20 kilos of high-enriched uranium it takes to build a bomb.

For Iran, at least, this should have been too good an offer to refuse—which is precisely why they did refuse it. The deal would have allowed them to continue to enrich uranium, never mind three binding U.N. Security Council resolutions calling on them to stop. It would have given them access to a significant stockpile of 20% enriched uranium, from which they could make a bomb in a matter of weeks rather than months. And it would have allowed them to kick the sanctions can another year down the road.

But Iran's leaders have learned that the West—and the Obama administration in particular—never closes the door on a diplomatic "opening," no matter how slight, and it never exacts much of a price for bad behavior. They've learned that they can always play to the anti-American peanut gallery, which if anything has grown larger since Barack H. Obama succeeded George W. Bush. And like Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," Iran also knows that "man will get used to anything—the scoundrel!"

In short, Iran's leaders have learned the uses of what the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan called "defining deviancy down." What was once considered deviant Iranian behavior—calling for Israel to be wiped off the map; enriching uranium in defiance of U.N. resolutions; even becoming a nuclear power—is increasingly seen as unremarkable, or understandable, or inevitable.

No wonder Mahmoud Ahmadinejad keeps emerging the winner in his diplomatic duels with the West. However the administration reacts to yesterday's agreement, Iran has all but guaranteed that the Security Council, on which both Turkey and Brazil currently sit, will not approve another round of sanctions.

Those sanctions were never going to be particularly effective, but at a minimum they were supposed to isolate Iran and generate a global consensus against its nuclear bid. Now it looks like the engagers in the Obama administration will fail where the unilateralists in the Bush administration succeeded three times.

The U.S. will also be hard-pressed to explain why a deal they never withdrew from the table—and which they insisted remain unaltered—no longer makes sense. The answer, of course, is that it never made much sense to begin with. But it is complete nonsense now that Iran has enriched several hundred additional kilos of additional uraniun and, according to the Rand Corporation's Gregory Jones, is doing so at a rate of 78 kilos a month, considerably faster than what they were capable of only last year. So much for all those technical problems Iran was said to be encountering, supposedly delaying the day of nuclear reckoning for at least three years.

If anything, that reckoning may be much nearer than most people, including U.S. government officials, realize. In a recent analysis for the Washington-based Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, Mr. Jones notes that "Iran could have enough low enriched uranium to process into one weapon's worth of [high enriched uranium] by the end of July and could then produce this HEU by mid-November."

It's time the administration take stock. In yesterday's phony triumph of diplomacy, any real hope for a diplomatic outcome ended. In its most crucial foreign policy test, the administration has lost, or ceded, control of the process. Iran is either going to become a nuclear power, or it will be stopped from doing so by military action. Either a war will be upon us, or a cycle of Mideast nuclear proliferation.

The administration fancies it can contain all this—Iran's ambitions, Arab insecurities, Israel's existential anxiety—via more smart diplomacy. The record so far does not inspire confidence.