

At the tipping-point

Testing the big powers' anti-proliferation promises.



Reuters

Did the UN Security Council's 15 members mean a word of their unanimous promise during the recent General Assembly meetings to protect the peace and security of all nations from the spread of the bomb? The discovery of a plant for making potentially weapons-usable uranium, dug secretly into a mountain on a military compound near the city of Qom, means that the test of their sincerity is Iran.

The talks between Iran and six countries—America, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China—that got under way this week in Geneva define a tipping-point. If Iran can be enticed or, more likely, prodded out of its serial nuclear deceit, the world will indeed be safer. But if Russia and China go on blocking efforts to squeeze Iran hard enough to get it to mend its ways, the dangers (and probably nuclear weapons themselves) are likely to proliferate alarmingly.

The Iranian nuclear challenge becomes clearer with each piece of damning intelligence. The latest revelation shows an accelerating effort that also includes work to produce plutonium, another potential bomb ingredient (see article). And with the Qom discovery, the timeline has shortened for Iran to be able to build a bomb secretly or—just as alarming to its neighbours, suddenly interested in nuclear skills themselves—to achieve the capacity to assemble one at speed. The window for a negotiated restraint on Iran's nuclear activities in which others could have confidence is closing fast.

Iran and the six face fateful choices. So far Iran has evaded or strung out talks, as its uranium-enrichment machines have spun on. Yet the discovery near Qom gives Iran a chance to change tack—though it has forgone several such chances in the past. This week's talks open the first formal, direct negotiations between America and Iran in 30 years. On the table, despite the violent clampdown after Iran's stolen election which kept Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, is an offer from the six not just of diplomatic and trading ties, and talks on regional security that would acknowledge Iran's growing clout. If Iran tells inspectors the truth and curbs its most dangerous nuclear activities, there would also be co-operation in other advanced nuclear technologies, including the civilian power-generation that it claims to be its sole aim.

Iran has so far shrugged off the offer, calculating that it can eventually win much of this anyway, and keep a foot in the nuclear door. Nuclear-armed India, it notes, was once a pariah and is now courted by America with offers of nuclear help. Everyone knows a military strike

against its nuclear sites would be fraught with danger, not least that Iran would soon be back in the nuclear business with bigger scores to settle.

Cover price

And sanctions? Curbs on some Iranian banks and businesses have inconvenienced the regime. But Russia and China have vetoed anything—a ban on oil and gas investment, closing ports to Iranian ships, cutting off lots more of its banks—that would hurt enough to force it to choose between its own future and its nuclear plans. Russia is wary of Iran causing trouble in the combustible Caucasus. China has greedily scooped up oil and gas contracts that others have declined. Both have been happy to see Iran tweak America's nose.

But Qom shows why business-as-usual is dangerous. The Security Council's anti-nuclear promise was meant to launch a big diplomatic effort to shore up the battered Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Unlike India, Iran has signed up to the treaty's non-nuclear rule. Persistently letting it cheat will cripple global anti-proliferation. If Russia and China continue to give Iran cover, that is the price the world will pay.

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