

Iran deal sets back US goal of sanctions

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When the leaders of Brazil and Turkey joined hands with Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, Iran's president, to celebrate Monday's agreement, the three men dealt a severe blow to US foreign policy.

For months, Hillary Clinton, US secretary of state, had warned Turkey and Brazil that their attempt to broker a deal over Iran's nuclear programme would go nowhere. Instead, the US wanted Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil's president, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister, to use their temporary membership of the Security Council to support another round of United Nations sanctions on Iran.

"I have told my counterparts in many capitals around the world that I believe that we will not get any serious response out of the Iranians until after the Security Council acts," Mrs Clinton said on Friday. She added that world leaders were moving towards "putting some real teeth into the sanctions, of uniting the world in a way that will send an unequivocal message to the Iranian leadership".

But Monday's agreement casts doubt on those assertions. It enormously complicates Washington's drive to impose more UN sanctions on Iran, perhaps the highest priority of the Obama administration's foreign policy.

"If the deal sticks, we have a period of diplomacy, with sanctions on a very slow track [and the] chance of an Israeli strike significantly reduced over the medium term," said Cliff Kupchan, an analyst at the Eurasia Group, a US-based consultancy. "The US has very little choice but to talk."

All the same, Washington is deeply sceptical about Monday's deal, which ostensibly amounts to Iran's acceptance of a confidence-building measure first proposed in Geneva in October.

Iran's nuclear programme has made significant progress since then. At that time, exporting 1,200kg of low-enriched uranium would have accounted for more than 70 per cent of Iran's total stockpile.

Today, Iran has managed to accumulate at least 2,065kg of low-enriched uranium, according to the latest report from the International Atomic Energy Agency, and sending 1,200kg to Turkey would account for only 58 per cent of the total. Iran is producing low-enriched uranium at a rate of about 125kg per month, meaning that it could replace the amount exported in less than 10 months.

Moreover, the agreement does not address the central issue: Iran's continued enrichment of uranium in breach of five UN resolutions, a process that could be used to make the essential material for a nuclear weapon.

"As far as we are concerned, this is one more trick from the Iranians," said a European diplomat. "Iran wants to appear as though it is open to negotiations and ready for compromise." He asked: "What about the question of Iran suspending its programme? Where does this agreement leave us on that?"

Already, the announcement seems to have ended Washington's hopes of winning Brazilian and Turkish support for more sanctions.

The question is whether the whole drive for another UN resolution has been sabotaged. That largely rests with China, which has the power of veto in the Security Council.

The Chinese embassy in Wa-sh-ington on Monday night welcomed “the latest diplomatic steps”, em-phasing that “dialogue and diplomatic negotiations” was its favoured approach on Iran.

There is also profound mistrust among Israeli leaders of Iranian diplomacy on the “nuclear file”. Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, a former defence minister who currently serves as minister for industry and labour, told Israeli radio on Monday: “I hope that Ahmadi-Nejad is not deceiving the world the way he has deceived it up until now. The fact is that the world ought to be troubled.”

Western diplomats in Tehran believe that Mr Ahmadi-Nejad wanted to sign this deal when it was first proposed last October, but was prevented by infighting in the regime.

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