

Game resumed

Iran pockets Bushehr and plays on.



A new drone poses with the president

IT WAS meant as a marker for the world's readiness to accept Iran's right to benefit from the peaceful uses of nuclear power, despite its provocative behaviour. By this reasoning, the fuelling this week by Russia of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, Iran's first power-generating nuclear plant that is due to start supplying electricity to the national grid by year's end, could help persuade the regime to return to the negotiating table over United Nations demands that it suspend more troubling nuclear work.

For Iran, however, Bushehr symbolises something altogether different: the fruits of defiance. It comes alongside recent reports that Iran has acquired a clutch of advanced air-defence missiles on the black market, developed its own new attack drone and supplied advanced radar to Syria, a neighbour of Israel, a country that Iran's fiery president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has talked of being wiped off the map. Such an attitude augurs ill for new talks about talks that Iran hints might resume in September with the six countries (America, Russia, Britain, France, Germany and China) that have been trying to negotiate it round.

Bushehr was built by Russia, after a German firm, Siemens, abandoned the project years ago. For the next ten years, its uranium fuel (enriched to under 5%) will come from Russia too and the spent fuel will go back there.

But for Iran, Bushehr is a source of great national pride: the culmination of 36 years' determination to get the reactor completed, come what may. And rather than suspend its own suspect uranium-enrichment efforts (the stuff can be used for power generation or, with further enrichment, abused for bomb-making), Iran insists it will press ahead at all speed, even though it has no nuclear reactors that need the stuff. Work on a third enrichment plant, in addition to one already up and running at Natanz and another recently discovered nearing completion on a military compound near the city of Qom, will get under way within months, says the country's atomic chief, with more to follow.

Iran insists that its nuclear programme is peaceful. But it has dodged proper talks with the six for two years now. It also refuses to answer questions from inspectors at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear guardian, about documents, experiments, development work and tell-tale imports that make sense only as part of a weapons-building effort.

A fourth round of UN sanctions was slapped on Iran in June, provoking the usual raspberry from its officials. They may be more irked by supplementary measures from America and its allies in Europe and Asia aimed at deterring foreign banks, insurance companies and energy firms from dealing with Iran. The hope is that, as the cost of Iran's nuclear defiance goes up, the regime may start to rethink the benefits of its confrontational approach. The six have been chewing their pencils of late, trying to think of confidence-building steps that Iran—and they—might take if the latest sanctions do help nudge it into more meaningful talks.

Iran, for its part, insists its uranium work is non-negotiable, now or ever. Rather than sit down with the six, it may be hoping to revive talks about a separate proposal for Russia, France, America and the IAEA to help it find replacement 20%-enriched fuel for a research reactor in Tehran that supplies medical isotopes. In fact the reactor has not been operating at full capacity and its refuelling may not be that urgent. In any event, Iran could buy medical isotopes it needs from private suppliers, as most other countries do.

Nonetheless, its demand that it be allowed to buy in the fuel, rather than the isotopes, offered another chance for outsiders to show they are not trying to halt genuinely peaceful nuclear activity in Iran. A proposal engineered by America last October would have removed much of Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium for Russia to enrich up to 20% and for France to fabricate into fuel rods for the reactor. Taking the stuff out of the country for a year or so while the fuel was prepared would have bought time for talks. It could also, America hoped, create a precedent for similar overseas processing of Iran's uranium in future. If its domestic stockpile could in this way be kept below a bomb's worth, this would also ease pressure in Israel for a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities and so buy yet more time for talks.

In the end, Iran backed out of the deal and provocatively started enriching to 20% itself (a big step further towards the high-enriched stuff need for a bomb). Ham-fisted attempts by Brazil and Turkey to revive the deal would have provided Iran with 20%-enriched uranium but brought none of the other benefits.

But the toing and froing over reactor fuel helps distract attention from Iran's refusal to come clean about its nuclear past. As over Bushehr, Iran plays a long game.

Fonte: The Economist, Aug. 26th 2010. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>.
Acesso em: 30 ago. 2010.