

Facing Facts on Iran

Editorial

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If reality bent to tough talk, Iran would have been forced to stop its uranium enrichment program a long time ago. The Bush administration sounded very stern this week in swatting down a tentative Russian attempt to work out a compromise with Tehran. Unfortunately, the depressing truth is that the United States has very few other options when it comes to making Iran stop working on projects that could lead to nuclear weapons, and Iran knows it.

The Russians had been floating an idea, with American approval, that called for Iran to agree to take part in a joint venture to produce enriched uranium to fuel nuclear power plants. That project would be conducted on Russian soil, with Iran agreeing to a moratorium on pursuing uranium enrichment back home.

The problem came when some Russian officials started talking about a deal that would let the Iranians continue a very small, strictly monitored, enrichment program of their own — a concession that its supporters regarded as merely face-saving. But others, including some nuclear scientists, said that such a deal would give the Iranians a critical wedge into the manufacture of nuclear weapons. When Washington made it clear that it would reject such a deal, the Russians pulled back.

Instead, the United States, which snubbed the United Nations when it came to Iraq, now wants the Security Council to solve the Iran problem by denouncing Tehran and, if that doesn't work, by perhaps imposing sanctions. The trouble is that other Council members are considered extremely unlikely to agree to sanctions, given, among other things, the dependence of some of those members on Iranian oil.

Seen from that vantage point, the rejected Russian compromise does not sound all that bad. It would probably not keep Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons over the long run. But a look at the alternatives currently available makes anything that would delay that process seem worth pursuing. And a strong, unified international accord behind such a deal could send a message to Iran that the world community is prepared to work to frustrate the worst of Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

The deal might not be doable in the end, but it shows more promise right now than any visible alternatives. And perhaps the following bears repeating once again:

¶The Bush administration is undermining any international controls on nuclear proliferation with its attempt to reward India for ignoring the rules and acquiring its own weapons.

¶American policies in the Middle East have made Iran incalculably more powerful than it was before the invasion of Iraq, while virtually eliminating any room for maneuvering when it comes to deploying the U.S. military.

¶Until the United States makes a serious attempt to cut down on its domestic use of oil, there will be no way for it to lecture any of its allies for wanting to maintain good relations with an oil supplier like Iran.