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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

What Scares Iran's Mullahs?

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IRAN has once again defied the United Nations by proceeding with enrichment activities, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported yesterday. And yet, simultaneously, Iranian officials have been sending a very different message — one that has gone largely unremarked but merits close attention.

After a meeting with the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the leader's chief foreign policy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, declared last week that suspending uranium enrichment is not a red line for the regime — in other words, the mullahs might be ready to agree to some kind of a suspension. Another powerful insider, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, said much the same thing in a different setting, while a third high-ranking official acknowledged that the Islamic Republic is seriously considering a proposal by President Vladimir Putin of Russia to suspend enrichment at least long enough to start serious negotiations with the United Nations.

There have also been indications that the Iranians are willing to accept a compromise plan presented by Mohamed ElBaradei, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency. That plan calls for the suspension of all major enrichment activities but allows the regime to save face by keeping a handful of centrifuges in operation.

The mullahs are keen on damage control on another front as well. After his meeting with Ayatollah Khamenei, Mr. Velayati announced that the Holocaust is a fact of history and chastised those who question its reality. Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, also declared the Holocaust a "historical matter" to be discussed by scholars (and not, he implied, by ignorant politicians). In short, there is a new willingness among the Iranian political elite to avoid the rhetoric of confrontation and to negotiate.

There are three ways to analyze this turn. Advocates of an American invasion of Iran say that last month's strengthening of the American armada in the Persian Gulf has frightened the Iranian regime. What diplomacy could not do for years, a few destroyers did in less than a month. These advocates encourage more of the same, hoping either that the mullahs will accept defeat in the face of an imminent attack, or that a Gulf of Tonkin incident will lead to a full attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

A second camp attacks the build-up of the armada as dangerous saber-rattling at best, and at worst as camouflage for already settled plans to attack Iran's nuclear sites. Such an attack, they say, might provide a much-needed feather for President Bush's empty cap at

a time when his Middle East policy has manifestly failed. According to this camp, what changed the minds of Iranian officials was only the United Nations resolution threatening economic sanctions, and the possibility of other resolutions and more serious sanctions.

Both camps are partly right and yet dangerously wrong. There is a third way of looking at the facts.

The mullahs have historically shown an unfailing ability to smell out and, when pragmatic, succumb to credible power in their foes. Indeed, the presence of the American ships has helped encourage them to negotiate. But no less clear is the fact that the mullahs' attitude change began in late December, when the United Nations Security Council finally passed a resolution against the regime in Tehran.

The passage of the resolution hastened the demise of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's confrontational approach to the West. And the falling price of oil, leading to declining revenues for the regime, magnified the resolution's economic impact. Top leaders of the Islamic Republic, from Ayatollah Khamenei to Mr. Rafsanjani, have made it clear that they consider sanctions a serious threat — more serious, according to Mr. Rafsanjani, than the possibility of an invasion.

In other words, what the unilateral and increasingly quixotic American embargo could not do in more than a decade, a limited United Nations resolution has accomplished in less than a month. And the resolution succeeded because few things frighten the mullahs more than the prospect of confronting a united front made up of the European Union, Russia, China and the United States. The resolution was a manifestation of just such a united front.

While the combination of credible force, reduced oil prices and a United Nations resolution has worked to create the most favorable conditions yet for a negotiated solution to the nuclear crisis, any unilateral American attack on Iran is sure to backfire. It will break the international coalition against the Islamic Republic's nuclear adventurism; it will allow China, Russia and even some countries in Europe to legitimately side with the mullahs; it will lead to higher oil prices and an increase in Iranian government revenues; and finally, it will help revive the waning power of the warmongers in Tehran.

Those convinced that only the combination of credible might and diplomatic pressure will work worry rightly that the Bush administration, frustrated by its failures in Iraq and goaded by hawks in Washington, will do to Iran what it did to Iraq. In confronting Saddam Hussein and the threat of his weapons of mass destruction, the Bush administration insisted that amassing an armada in the Persian Gulf was necessary to frighten Mr. Hussein into submission. But once the armada was in place, they used it to carry out a long-ago planned invasion of Iraq.

Today, many worry that the plans for an invasion of Iran, too, were made long ago, and that the armada is there to make possible either another Gulf of Tonkin resolution or an

Iranian act of provocation against American forces, which could then serve as an excuse for an attack on Iran.

War and peace with Iran are both possible today. With prudence, backed by power but guided by the wisdom to recognize the new signals coming from Tehran, the United States can today achieve a principled solution to the nuclear crisis. Congress, vigilant American citizens and a resolute policy from America's European allies can ensure that this principled peace is given a chance.

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