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Time

Iran's Missile Test: A Message to Obama and Netanyahu

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Iran's latest missile test may have less to do with advancing its military capability than with getting a last word in on Monday's conversation between [President Barack Obama](#) and [Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#). After all, the weapon whose test-firing was announced Wednesday by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on the election campaign trail does not significantly extend the reach of others already in Iran's arsenal. Instead, it appears to have been a ballistic message, to Iranian voters as well as to the U.S. and its Mideast allies, that Iran isn't about to be intimidated into backing off its nuclear development, and that it has the means to retaliate against any military strikes.

Netanyahu emerged from Monday's White House meeting saying he and Obama saw "exactly eye to eye" on the Iran issue, and some media reports suggested that Obama had agreed to a deadline of the end of 2009 for his diplomatic efforts to succeed in persuading Iran to reverse course on its nuclear program. In fact, Obama was more nuanced in response to the Israelis' [agitation for a time limit on Washington's outreach to Tehran](#), refusing to impose an "artificial deadline" but affirming that his patience was not unlimited, and that by year's end he would have a good idea whether Iran was making a "good-faith effort to resolve differences." The President seeks to avoid being strung along by Tehran in open-ended talks, but is also mindful of the futility of simply reiterating ultimatums that have until now left the Iranians unmoved.

Iran insists its nuclear intentions are confined to generating electricity, but the concern of the U.S. and its allies is that the infrastructure of a civilian nuclear program - particularly uranium enrichment - puts a nuclear weapon within short-term reach should Iran decide to assemble one. (Israel and U.S. believe that [Iran has not yet taken such a decision](#), and to do so it would have to expel the international inspectors that currently monitor its enrichment facility at Natanz. That's because the uranium already enriched there would have to be reprocessed to a far higher degree of enrichment to create bomb material.) The position adopted until now by the U.S. and its European allies and Israel is that Iran should not be permitted to develop even "breakout capacity" of the type maintained by, for example, Japan - i.e., a peaceful nuclear-energy infrastructure that could be quickly converted to bomb production should the government choose to weaponize.

The Israelis want to limit the diplomatic time frame out of fear that Iran will use open-ended talks as a cover for expanding its nuclear infrastructure. After all, even the Bush Administration had, in its final years, backed away from demanding that Iran suspend uranium enrichment as a precondition for talks,

and Obama is unlikely to resuscitate a position to which the Iranians have shown no intention to concede. Instead, he seeks to create the most favorable conditions for diplomacy to work, because the alternatives are so unpalatable. Military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities are deemed by the U.S. military to be likely to cause more problems than they'll solve - at best, they'd simply set back the Iranian program by a few years, at the price of potentially triggering a regional war that could imperil the interests of the U.S. and its allies, including Israel, for years to come. Winning Chinese and Russian support for harsher sanctions remains unlikely absent Iran taking actual steps towards nuclear weaponization, while an economic blockade could prompt a confrontation.

The timetable for talks is obviously less important than the result, however, so the key question facing Obama is this: Can Washington and Tehran agree to a compromise on Iran's nuclear program, and would such a formula be acceptable to the Israelis?

Until now, the European diplomacy backed by the Bush Administration has aimed at getting Iran first to suspend uranium enrichment and then to agree to forgo the right to enrichment on its own soil, instead importing the fuel for its nuclear-energy program, in exchange for a package of political, economic and diplomatic incentives. Even if the U.S. agrees to talk while Iran's centrifuges are spinning, what's less clear is whether Washington and its allies will eventually settle for less than Iran forgoing enrichment altogether, and accept some level of low-grade enrichment being conducted under an expanded inspection regime.

The purpose of seeking to deny Iran enrichment capability had been, as President Bush stressed, to prevent Iran from "mastering the technology" to create bomb-grade material. But Iran has clearly now mastered enrichment technology, producing a steadily growing stockpile of low-enriched uranium. While the U.S. would obviously like Tehran to dismantle its enrichment facilities, there's widespread doubt in Washington and beyond that the Iranians would agree.

"It is highly unlikely that the United States will be able to persuade or pressure Iran to forgo uranium enrichment entirely," former Bush Administration State Department official and current Council on Foreign Relations president Richard Haass recently noted. "The best that can be hoped for is a ceiling on what Tehran does - in particular, not enrich uranium to a concentration required for a weapon - and intrusive inspections so that the world can be confident of this. The outcome is less than ideal, to say the least, but it is one we could live with."

Whether the Israelis would be ready to live with Iran maintaining a measure of "breakout capacity," albeit under a far tighter inspection regime, remains to be seen. Israeli officials have in the past insisted on a quick and complete end to uranium enrichment in Iran, failing which they'll consider military action - although Netanyahu has undertaken to refrain from attacking Iran without first consulting Washington. But Iran is unlikely simply to climb down. It will likely show flexibility in seeking a formula that addresses Western concerns over its nuclear intentions, but on its own terms. What either side will offer, or be willing to accept, of course, must remain a matter of conjecture: diplomatic opening bids seldom resemble bottom lines in resolving a strategic stalemate. But the conversation between Obama and Netanyahu on Iran could yet prove testy in the months ahead.