



Nuclear Samba

Tabula

June 7-13, 2010

David J. Smith*

Western diplomats were poised to impose new sanctions on Iran's nuclear program when on May 17 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Brazilian President Inacio Lula da Silva and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appeared in Tehran, clasped hands raised in triumph, to announce an agreement aimed at defusing the international tension surrounding Iran's nuclear endeavors. This agreement is unlikely to earn even a footnote in history, but the geopolitical dynamic from which it springs may define international relations for years.

The *Joint Declaration by Iran, Turkey and Brazil* is designed to resemble an offer that the international community made to Iran last October. Iran would deposit 1.200 kilograms of low enriched uranium (LEU) in Turkey in exchange for 120 kilograms of nuclear fuel appropriate for the Tehran Research Reactor. However, during the seven intervening months, Iran has produced enough LEU to replace what it would send to Turkey. Moreover, the Ahmadinejad-Erdogan-Lula agreement recognizes Iran's right to continue enrichment, notwithstanding five United Nations resolutions to the contrary.

At best, the agreement will turn the calendar back to last Autumn. At worst, it will be another dilatory device. Unsurprisingly, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed the tripartite agreement within hours of its Tehran debut. The permanent members of the UN Security Council would, she said, press ahead with sanctions. Russia and China apparently agreed.

The Iran-Turkey-Brazil agreement will complicate Security Council deliberations. Brazil and Turkey, which hold non-permanent council seats, refuse to discuss new sanctions, and they will have some influence with other non-permanent members such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon, Nigeria and Uganda.

Nonetheless, some sanctions resolution will likely pass—Brazil and Turkey do not yet have the clout to derail it.

However, we—particularly Washington—would be foolish to disregard them. Brazil is the world's 10th largest economy; Turkey the 17th—these are emergent powers of the 21st Century.

Both have economic interests in Iran—hundreds of Brazilian business people followed Lula to Tehran. Both assert their growing influence on the world stage—Erdoğan choreographed his arrival in Tehran to underscore Turkey's role as regional power broker.

Worse, writes Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post*, these countries have “decided that there's no cost in lining up with America's enemies and no profit in lining up with a US president given to apologies and appeasement.”

With Washington adrift, countries like Brazil and Turkey—and, by the way, Iran—are flexing their muscles and beginning to mold the future.

The result, in this region for example, will be a whirlwind of competition among re-emergent traditional powers—Iran, Turkey and Russia—with Arab countries scurrying to catch up and China stealthily stepping in. Smaller countries will naturally hedge their bets on the future and curry favor with emergent medium powers.

An Iranian nuclear weapon would turn this nasty geopolitical prospect into a nightmare.

The Iran-Turkey-Brazil agreement will not prevent that, but neither will a fourth round of sanctions. Washington appears not to understand that Iran wants nuclear weapons not as dangerous toys but as geopolitical tools to undermine American superpower, a prospect that Russia and China relish.

Some sanctions resolution will pass because Moscow and Beijing have already beguiled Washington to pay their price. Russia can still sell the S-300 air defense system to Iran. And, US President Barack Obama coos, “the situation in Georgia need no longer be considered an obstacle” to a US-Russia nuclear cooperation agreement. Meanwhile, Beijing excised specific economic and energy measures from the sanctions resolution.

One day, writes David Ignatius in the *Washington Post*, this “will end when Iran announces— Surprise!—that it has all the elements for a nuclear weapon and is now a *de facto* nuclear state. It will be a brave new world—but will America still have any friends?”

*David J. Smith is Director, Georgian Security Analysis Center, Tbilisi, and Senior Fellow, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Washington.