

New concerns generated by an old irritant

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A dramatic statement at the beginning of the G-20 economic summit in Pittsburgh, from President Barack Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has raised the stakes — at least at the rhetorical level — for talks scheduled Thursday between Iran and six major nations over Iran's nuclear ambitions. Whether this heightened concern leads to anything substantive is another question.

What prompted the stern talk from the three leaders is the public disclosure that Iran is building (has built?) a second uranium enrichment facility near the holy city of Qom, about 100 miles southwest of Tehran. Apparently Western intelligence services have been aware of work on the facility for a couple of years, and Iran formally disclosed information about the facility to the International Atomic Energy Agency, perhaps as a pre-emptive move.

The countries meeting with Iran this week no doubt will insist on untrammled access to the new facility by the IAEA and ironclad assurances that Iran does not intend to build nuclear weapons. Iran still insists that its nuclear program is only to generate electricity, but hardly anyone outside Iran's borders believes that.

Interestingly, in a switch from recent times, France is playing the "bad cop" regarding Iran's nuclear intentions, with President Sarkozy insisting that if Iran is not forthcoming by December the world should impose harsh economic sanctions on the mullahs' regime. "Iran has the right to nuclear energy," Sarkozy said Wednesday, but "imaging nuclear arms in the hands of the current leadership is unacceptable."

While disclosure of a previously concealed second Iranian uranium enrichment plant seems to have alarmed leaders of most countries, it is still unclear whether effective international sanctions can be imposed. A United Nations Security Council resolution could be vetoed by any of the five permanent members, and until now two of those five, Russia and China, have expressed reluctance to go along. In recent days Russia — perhaps as a result of the U.S. decision not to place anti-missile weaponry in Poland and the Czech Republic — has signaled possible willingness to cooperate, but nobody seems to know about China.

Then there's the question of the effectiveness of economic sanctions. More often than not, economic sanctions hurt the people of a target country while hardly damaging and sometimes even reinforcing the power of the obnoxious leaders. Effective limits on gasoline imports combined with the weakness of the regime revealed in the wake of the recent fraudulent election might change the equation in this instance, but that's far from certain.

Ted Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, pointed out one other possible complication — even beyond the possibility that Israel might initiate a military strike if negotiations bog down. It is possible, he says, that even if the current regime of mullahs and Holocaust-deniers were replaced, a reformist regime might still pursue an aggressive nuclear program for nationalistic reasons.

The situation is perhaps more volatile than even most doomsayers realize.