**Letting the mullahs get the bomb**

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April 28, 2010

New York Post

Original Source:

*http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/letting\_the\_mullahs\_get\_the\_bomb\_lOTwsFYnf8jA5XMnR502wI#ixzz0mPhmHArm*

Schmoozing with the ladies of "The View," Vice President Joseph Biden predicted last week that the Security Council would impose sanctions on Iran by the end of this month or early next. Let's hope he knows something that the negotiators in New York don't.

Many diplomats here are skeptical that a punitive resolution could be enacted at the United Nations before June -- which gives Iran and its Security Council enablers, starting with Brazil and Turkey, enough time to undermine the sanctions.

So unless America's UN Ambassador Susan Rice quickly pulls a rabbit out of her diplomatic hat, preferably this week, much of the Obama administration's indecisive Iran maneuvering will be further compromised.

Yes, there's an agreement in principle that it's time for sanctions, but as April comes to a close, the UN diplomats negotiating in New York are falling into a familiar routine. Ambassadors from the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany meet almost daily, while the Chinese or Russian representatives raise objections to this or that American-proposed sanction.

The others try to defend it, leading to a bit of give and take around the table. But, in the end, no agreement is reached, so it's on to the next item.

So April is all but gone. How about next month?

"We work 12 months a year," Rice told me last week, dismissing the widely held notion that May is off the table.

But some diplomats worry that an anti-Iranian resolution in May might be disruptive for Lebanon, which holds the rotating council presidency for the month, because Tehran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, controls half of the seats in the Beirut government.

Also, world leaders, including Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, are scheduled to gather in New York early next week for a month-long periodic review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Egypt plans to raise demands for Israel's nuclear disarmament.

Other powerful Third Worlders will attack the recent Russian-American arms-reduction treaties as insufficient, calling on the nuclear powers to disarm before they "preach" to the nuclear have-nots.

Why spoil such a perfectly inane UN session by raising Iran's violation of the NPT? As Brazil's foreign minister, Celso Amorim, said recently, May's NPT conference shouldn't be "contaminated" by discussing Iran.

Rice hasn't yet shown her sanctions proposal to Brazil and Turkey, which now sit on the Security Council. Instead, the two countries are attempting to revive the dead horse of negotiations with Iran. As Amorim told me during a recent UN visit, "Iran has to show flexibility, but I think the West also has to show flexibility."

Amorim was in Tehran yesterday, preparing a mid-May visit there by the Brazilian President Lula da Silva. Along with the Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who visited Tehran a week earlier, Amorim hopes to get the Iranians to send nuclear fuel to another country, ensuring that enrichment doesn't reach weapons-grade level.

Iran has dangled this nuclear-fuel "swap" idea in front of diplomats for years, but as the Obama team has learned recently, the mullahs never deliver, and their terms aren't sufficient, anyway.

Nevertheless, a new, 11th-hour Turkish-Brazilian "swap" plan (perhaps using Turkish soil) could emerge soon. Any indication that Iran may agree -- yesterday Iran's foreign minister, Manoucher Mottaki, told Amorim that he hoped such a plan could be finalized "in the near future" -- would severely undermine sanctions talks, even if the six powers are close to an agreement by then.

All this maneuvering at the UN, where big and midsize nations' influence is much weightier than their real power, is seriously setting back Obama's Iran agenda.

Yet, even as Congress sought to impose severe American sanctions on Iran back in January, the president reportedly asked for a delay until the UN agreed on sanctions. (Now, Congress is set to impose sanctions by the end of May.)

Sooner or later, Rice will likely convince enough of her colleagues to impose sanctions. After all, the "isolationist" Bush administration got the UN to impose sanctions three times. But why wait? By now we could have created, say, a virtual naval blockade on our own by pressing the world's major insurance companies to deny policies to shipping firms that deliver goods to Iran. Or we could have better aided Israel's secret sabotage operations against Iran's nuclear program.

Yet, Obama wasted a whole year hopelessly chasing negotiations and then, overestimating his ability to convince "the world" to formally adopt grand resolutions, wasted months at the UN while doing almost nothing elsewhere. No wonder insiders like Defense Secretary Robert Gates ask aloud whether Obama even has a long-term Iran strategy. beavni@gmail.com