



COMMENTARY

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The U.S.-EU Summit and the Challenge of Iran's Nuclear Program

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On June 21, President Bush visits Vienna to attend the annual U.S.-European Union Summit, giving the President an important opportunity to reinforce recent diplomatic efforts to head off Iran's nuclear program. Only by maintaining a united front in the face of Iran's burgeoning nuclear potential can the U.S. and the EU hope to succeed diplomatically in heading off a nuclear-capable Iran.

The summit comes at a pivotal time in the Bush administration. The tone in the Bush administration's second term has been different from the first, with much greater emphasis on diplomacy and alliance management. This change, welcome as it is, is driven as much by the realities in Iraq and the shortage of other options. Regardless of its origins, this new approach sets the stage for improved international cooperation on such important issues as Iran and nonproliferation more broadly.

The timing of this summit presents a unique opportunity for President Bush to engage the Europeans on the Iran issue. Iran is still considering the incentives package it was offered by Britain, France, Germany (the so-called EU-3), China, Russia, and the United States on June 1. Having supported the EU-3's efforts and offered direct talks as an added incentive to Iran, President Bush has improved his standing and support among European leaders. The package offered to Iran includes numerous benefits for Tehran if it agrees to suspend its uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing programs and return to negotiations. In exchange for a prolonged freeze on its enrichment and reprocessing efforts, Iran would get help with building new power plants – light water reactors that are less proliferation-prone. The proposal also includes language that offers Iran the prospect of security guarantees. Most importantly in terms of the proposal's political attractiveness, the deal would also allow Iran – after some time and after receiving approval from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN Security Council – to resume enrichment activities in the future. This step acknowledges Iran's right to nuclear technology provided it is in compliance with its treaty obligations.

In addition to those positive measures, there are also numerous economic incentives that range from civil aviation cooperation to full support for its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

As Iran is considering the proposal delivered by Javier Solana, the EU's high representative for Foreign Policy, the timing of the summit offers President Bush the opportunity to capitalize on the U.S. offer to engage in direct talks with Iran. Standing side by side with the EU's top officials, the president can in one step make clear that the offer on the table is the best Iran can hope to receive. With the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries still joined firmly together in supporting Iran's right to enrich under the guidelines of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the U.S. and the EU offer makes clear that Iran's rights will be respected if it complies with its international treaty commitments.

In addition to the issue of Iran, this summit also provides an opportune setting to build up to the upcoming G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg and to lay the groundwork for issues to be discussed there. Issues to be discussed in St. Petersburg include energy security and nonproliferation, both of which will also be discussed at the U.S.-EU summit. President Bush should underscore the importance of the Global Partnership to Prevent the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction to his EU counterparts. This partnership is a G-8 initiative begun in 2002 that seeks to keep weapons of mass destruction and their related technologies out of the hands of terrorists and those who harbor them. International efforts for this program are lagging, especially in Europe, and the U.S. needs to underscore the Global Partnership's importance, and the need to work together to combat further proliferation collectively.

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In the long run, it remains to be seen what role the EU will play in security and nonproliferation issues in particular. By playing such a central role in the Iran case, the EU has demonstrated that it has a role to play, and success in its diplomatic efforts with Iran hold out the hope that the EU will become a pillar in and of itself in the effort to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. In years to come, this summit will likely be a footnote, but a positive outcome in Vienna can ensure that it is a positive footnote in a longer history of cooperation and trans-Atlantic unity.

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