WILL NORTH KOREAN BOMB TEST PROVIDE OPENING FOR NUCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS WITH IRAN?

Shortly after we learned last night that North Korea had carried out a nuclear weapon test, I saw some suggestions along the lines of "this may as well have been an Iranian test since Iran and North Korea are sharing data". I wonder, however, whether the outcome of this test will in fact provide more room for Iran and the West to make real progress in negotiations that have been stalled for over a year.

Perhaps the most encouraging development after the test became known was this from Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman:

> Iran said on Tuesday that all the world's nuclear weapons should be destroyed, shortly after North Korea said it had conducted its third nuclear test in defiance of United Nations resolutions.
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> "We think we need to come to a point where no country will have any nuclear weapons," Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast told a weekly news conference when asked about the test. "All weapons of mass destruction and nuclear arms need to be destroyed."
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> Mehmanparast added that all countries should be able to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

That is not a new position for Iran, but the timing for reiterating it is encouraging.

Of course, those who want war with Iran (and

especially Israel, with Netanyahu continuing to use inflamed rhetoric) will dismiss such a statement quickly, but this statement from Iran actually comes with concrete actions to back it up. I have yet to see Western media sources acknowledge that in addition to Iran's claims that it is using nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, it actually is taking steps to expand its production of medical isotopes (see this post where I point out Iran's plans to construct four new research reactors for production of medical isotopes). We see more evidence of those concrete steps today, with Iran confirming in a news conference today that more of the stockpile of 20% enriched uranium has been converted to fuel plates for use in research reactors:

> Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast was asked at a weekly news conference about a Reuters report that Iran has converted small amounts of its 20-percent enriched uranium into reactor fuel.
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> "This work is being done and all its reports have been sent to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in a complete manner," he was quoted as saying by the state news agency IRNA.

This is a significant development, because Israel has been asserting that Iran would have sufficient 20% enriched uranium by June that it would have enough material for a bomb after it is converted to the 90%+ level needed for a weapon. Always missing from this discussion in the Western media, however, is any acknowledgement that the IAEA maintains a constant presence at Iran's known uranium processing facilities, so such an attempt at "breakout" would be known immediately or would have to occur at a secret facility with uranium that is separate from the supply which IAEA meticulously monitors.

Couple that disclosure with this announcement

that additional medical isotopes are being developed (and recall that in the post I linked above, Iran is forced to resort to producing these isotopes because international sources of them have been cut off by sanctions):

> Deputy Chairman of the National Science and Technology Center for Macro Presidential Projects says Iran will unveil national projects before the end of the current administration and "we will also unveil 8 new radio-isotopes used in nuclear medicine."

Talks between the IAEA and Iran resume tomorrow and the P5+1 talks will resume later this month. Both the IAEA and Iran are putting out positive statements expressing hope for progress in the negotiations and the US has sent an envoy to Israel in an attempt to calm their rhetoric and actions while negotiations continue. Let's hope the negotiations are productive and that hostilities can be averted.

In one final aside, I'm not sure what to make of this complaint from Iran that IAEA is not protecting confidential information. Recall that previously, Iran has gone so far as to claim IAEA is infiltrated with spies and that Iranian nuclear scientists might have been identified for subsequent assassination based on information provided from IAEA to Israeli and US intelligence agencies. The only "leak" that seems on first analysis to fit today's complaint is the news of conversion of 20% uranium to fuel plates. Considering that Iran went ahead and confirmed that leak, it's hard to see why they would be upset about it, especially since it should serve to keep Israel at bay for a while. I'll keep an eye out for any other information that may have been the basis for the complaint.