

Options for Preventing a Nuclear-Armed Iran

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I left the U.S. yesterday in the midst of media frenzy about the new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear program, which concludes that Iran halted its efforts to design nuclear weapons in 2003 and predicts that Iran is still likely to be several years away from building an enrichment facility capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon. In other words, the danger that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons is not urgent. Most experts and commentators in the U.S. believe that this assessment will weaken Western efforts to strengthen international sanctions against Iran and undercut any rationale for launching military attacks against Iran's nuclear facilities during the remainder of the Bush administration. I agree with this judgment.

In fact, even before the NIE was made public, prospects for preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability have become worse. Note when I say "nuclear weapons capability", I am talking mainly about the ability of a country to produce significant quantities of highly enriched uranium. A significant quantity is about 20-25 kilograms of uranium enriched to 90% U-235, which is the minimum necessary to produce a simple nuclear weapon. Once a country achieves the ability to produce large quantities of highly enriched uranium in a short period of time, it has a credible option to produce nuclear weapons, provided that it can fabricate a nuclear weapon from this

highly enriched uranium. In general, development of a capability to produce fissile nuclear material is a more important and challenging technical threshold than weaponization - the ability to fabricate nuclear material into a simple weapon.

Hence, it appears that Iran has decided to put its nuclear weaponization work on hold for the time being and focus its efforts on developing its enrichment capability. This is a smart strategy. By halting weaponization research and focusing on developing its enrichment program, Iran is in a stronger position to claim that its nuclear program is purely peaceful and that Iran has abandoned efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. This approach weakens Western efforts to isolate and sanction Iran. At the same time, Iran retains the option in the future to revive its nuclear weaponization program once it has attained its enrichment objectives.

Since January 2006, Iran has resumed enrichment activities and ignored international pressures to stop, including two United Nations Security Council Resolutions demanding that Iran suspend enrichment activities as a condition for beginning multilateral nuclear negotiation with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany. Prospects for significantly increasing international pressures on Iran in the near term are not good. Despite the report last month by Mohammed El-Baradei, the head of the IAEA, that Iran has failed to provide cooperation to resolve questions about its past nuclear activities – including weaponization research - Russia and China are blocking strong new Security Council sanctions. And, the new NIE will make it even more difficult to get Moscow and Beijing on board. If the Security Council passes a new resolution in the near future, it is likely to be weak, with only a

modest expansion of existing sanctions on a small number of Iranian individuals and companies associated with Iran's nuclear and missile programs.

Frustrated by the lack of Security Council action, the U.S. has imposed additional unilateral financial sanctions on several Iranian banks and is urging its allies in Europe and Japan to apply economic sanctions on their own. However, there is strong resistance in Europe to sanctions outside the Security Council because of fear that Chinese and Indian companies will simply fill the void left as European companies retreat. In the meantime, talks between EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and his new Iranian counterpart Dr. Jalili, a mid-level diplomat appointed by President Ahmadinejad to replace the more moderate Ali Larijani, are going nowhere. In the most recent round of talks last weekend in London, Jalili reportedly told Solana that any previous compromises discussed by Larijani are no longer valid. According to Jalili, the talks will need to start from scratch.

In short, it does not appear that a diplomatic breakthrough is likely anytime soon. If Iran continues to develop its enrichment capacity, the United States will eventually face a very difficult choice between two extremely bad options. On one hand, the U.S. could accept Iran as a nuclear weapons capable state – that is, a country with a large enough civilian enrichment plant to produce a significant quantity of weapons grade uranium in a short period of time. In this sense, Iran would be like other countries with an advanced civilian fuel cycle capability, such as Japan and Germany, which have access to fissile material. The difference, however, is that I believe Iran is very likely to break its commitments under the NPT (as it has already done for 20 years) and build nuclear weapons. A nuclear-armed Iran would significantly increase tensions and

instability in the Middle East if Iran felt that it was in an even stronger position to assert its dominance in the region. Moreover, it could lead to a nuclear arms race in the region and damage the international non-proliferation regime.

On the other hand, if the United States is not prepared to accept Iran as a nuclear weapons capable state, Washington could use military force against Iran's nuclear facilities. This is not an attractive option. Even if the known facilities are destroyed, Iran is likely to rebuild its capabilities within a few years, especially if Iran has taken the precaution of stockpiling materials and equipment so it can recover from a military attack. Furthermore, there is a risk that even limited air strikes could escalate into a broader conflict, which could consolidate hard line rule in Tehran, inflame Muslim anger against the United States, destabilize the region and disrupt oil supplies from the Persian Gulf. Ironically, now that the security situation in Iraq appears to be somewhat improving, there is even less incentive for Washington to attack Iran and run the risk of provoking a new wave of violence in Iraq.

Fortunately, we do not face an immediate need to choose between accepting Iran as a nuclear power and attacking Iran's nuclear facilities. As the new National Intelligence Estimates concludes, Iran is still likely several years away from the ability to produce large quantities of highly enriched uranium. This is because of technical difficulties in running their centrifuge machines at high speeds. According to the latest IAEA report, Iran has completed a pilot scale enrichment facility of about 3,000 centrifuge machines, but it is only operating the plant at about 30% capacity in terms of production of low enriched uranium. It is difficult to estimate how long it will take Iran to overcome these technical problems. Some experts think it may take a few years;

others think it could only be a few months. In any event, once the problems are resolved, Iran will need to install a build a much larger enrichment plant to achieve the ability to produce a significant amount of weapons grade uranium in a short period of time. For example, a pilot scale facility of 3,000 centrifuge machines would require a full year of operation to produce enough weapons grade uranium for a single bomb. During that year, Iran would be exposed to international pressure or military attack. In contrast, an industrial scale facility of some 50,000 centrifuge machines could produce enough fissile material for a bomb within a few days of operation. Once Iran completes an industrial scale facility, it will also be easier to hide a smaller clandestine facility, which could allow Iran to produce nuclear weapons without any advance warning.

For the time being, therefore, there seems to be time to deploy more vigorous diplomacy to prevent or at least delay Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability. In part, this will require stronger sanctions to persuade Tehran that the risks of economic damage and political isolation outweigh the value of pursuing its nuclear program in the face of international opposition. In addition, it will require stronger engagement by the United States with Iran to make clear that Washington is prepared to offer normalized relations with Tehran if nuclear and other issues are resolved. Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, for example, recently proposed that the United States offer to begin direct negotiations with Iran on a broad range of issues without condition. All of the leading Democratic candidates for President have proposed a similar approach.

Whether direct U.S. engagement with Iran can produce a diplomatic solution is unclear. The current Iranian leadership may prefer to pursue their efforts to achieve a nuclear weapons capability while the U.S. is weakened by its involvement in Iraq and the

big powers are divided over the use of sanctions and Iran protected from sanctions by high oil prices. If Washington drops the condition of enrichment suspension as a condition for nuclear negotiation, it will be seen in Tehran as a sign of weakness and make it even less likely that Iran will accept delays or limits on its enrichment program in exchange for American incentives. For hardliners in Tehran, the offer of normalized relations with the United States may be a poisoned carrot because they prefer a hostile relationship with the United States to justify the need to maintain strong internal controls and religious purity at home. Certainly, there is no sign that President Ahmadi Nejad is prepared to compromise Iran's enrichment program for any price.

In this sense, the timing of an American decision to offer unconditional and broad negotiations with Iran needs to be carefully considered. If Iran is not on the verge of acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, it might make more sense to wait and see whether the 2009 Presidential elections in Iran produces a more pragmatic leader open to an overture from Washington. Moreover, the new U.S. administration might be able to strengthen America's bargaining position with Tehran if it is able to restore America's international prestige and credibility and improve America's position in the Middle East if it can make further progress is made in stabilizing Iraq and advancing Israeli-Palestinian final status negotiations. Under these circumstances, the negotiation of an acceptable agreement would still be difficult, but it might be possible to agree on a package of technical limits and delays on Iran's enrichment capabilities plus strong verification measures that reduce the danger that Iran will use its enrichment program to produce nuclear weapons. Certainly, the U.S. needs to make every effort to achieve a diplomatic solution. If Tehran rejects Washington's offers, it will be easier for the United

States to make the case that additional sanctions and pressure are necessary to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability. If a future U.S. President decides to attack Iran's nuclear facilities – with all the grave dangers that step entails – he or she must be able to demonstrate to the American public and to the world that the U.S. has exhausted every diplomatic avenue before resorting to force.

In conclusion, the near term prospects for slowing down or stopping Iran's enrichment program are not good. The current Western diplomatic strategy has failed for two years and is unlikely to succeed for the remainder of President Bush's term in office. During this time, Iran will continue to work on perfecting its centrifuge technology and expanding its enrichment capacities, but it is not likely to cross the nuclear threshold – in terms of being able to produce large quantities of highly enriched uranium in a short period. As such, there is still time to mount a more vigorous diplomatic effort, including both stronger sanctions and stronger U.S. engagement with Iran, to avoid the choice between accepting Iran as a nuclear power or attacking Iran's nuclear facilities. It will probably fall to the next U.S. administration to conduct this more vigorous diplomacy.