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Iran and Nuclear Non-Proliferation

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By: Heather Lyster

The international spotlight is now being shared between democracy-building in Iraq and nuclear non-proliferation in Iraq's neighbor, Iran. Though claiming to be building nuclear power plants for energy sources alone, major European leaders and the United States believe that this is just a stepping stone to creating nuclear weapons capabilities. Iran is increasingly defiant in accommodating any infringement on their rights, but continues a dialogue regarding world demands for scaling back their nuclear programs. Iran claims that their uranium enrichment and plutonium separation is solely for energy producing purposes, however these are also necessary steps to building a nuclear weapons program. For concerned nations, the most important goal is to end these programs and nuclear processes, which can later be used to produce weapons of mass destruction. Although there are claims from Tehran showing a willingness to work with world demands, there has yet to be an accepted plan for implementing and monitoring the activities in Iranian nuclear facilities.

Hopes for a regime change within Iran do not seem realistic. Information seems to support the idea that even the moderates in Iran support a nuclear program. It is even questioned whether or not the current regime is indeed as unstable or weak as believed. The idea that a regime change will help solve the nuclear weapons program for the West is unreliable.

Explanation for Pursuing a Nuclear Weapons Program

A key element in addressing the alarm behind this complex and sensitive issue is an understanding of Iran's pursuit for a nuclear program despite international pressure. In the face of protests from major international actors, such as the European Union, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United States, Iran stands by its rights to continue a supposed energy producing nuclear program. Through inspections evidence from the IAEA back to 2003, it could be determined that Iran was dishonest and concealing a separate nuclear agenda, while violating non-proliferation guidelines.¹ With this evidence, alleged plans for the creation of an Iranian nuclear weapons program were given substantial support.

The most obvious motive and/or desire for a nation to move forward with plans to possess nuclear weapons is defensive in nature – particularly in a volatile, unpredictable region of the world such as the Middle East. Dating back to the Cold War days, a bi-polar world and nuclear deterrence, nuclear weapons have been used as a shield from outside aggression. This theory has not died with the end of the Cold War. A nation's defense may be centered on its ability to retaliate against potential threats. Acquiring nuclear weapons gives a nation the implicit threat of retaliation against any international or regional actor that may choose to threaten its autonomy.

In this scenario of nuclear capabilities, there is also a motive countering defensive capabilities. As Patrick Clawson² of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy wrote, Iran may use the acquisition of nuclear weapons to assert its power in the Middle East through an offensive nature. Clawson continues that the more hard line elements of the Iranian government

¹Daalder & Levi. "How to Counter Iran's Nuclear Threat." Financial Times (9/24/03)

have repeatedly disrupted events in the region, attacked Americans and instigated disputes with other nations in the region. As touched upon earlier, former Undersecretary of State, John Bolton even went so far as to say that not just hard liners, but even moderate elements in Iran would like to work towards the creation of nuclear weapons.³ Iran, clearly not now the peacemaker in Middle East politics, has proven that it can be a more hostile element in the region, and thus an alarming prospective nuclear force.

Western objections to possible nuclear proliferation in the Middle East can be considered hypocritical by Arab nations due to Israel's possession of nuclear weapons. As efforts are made to control nuclear proliferation, Israel has not made efforts to dismantle its capabilities. However it is undeniable that Israel faces unprecedented security challenges – both Syria and Iran do not even acknowledge the existence of the state of Israel.⁴ Yet, the knowledge by its neighbors that Israel does have nuclear weapons, is believed to be a threat and thus creates a deeper environment of insecurity in the region.

Diplomacy: Demands and Incentives v. Disincentives

As with any major negotiation, there are demands to be met on both sides and differing methods to achieve this. For the U.S., EU-3 and other interested parties, their demands center around: intrusive inspections by the international community namely the IAEA, adhering to additional Protocol of the IAEA and a complete halt in uranium enrichment and plutonium separation programs.⁵ Given these demands on one side, there is the “carrot and/or the stick” approach. Actors in discussions must decide whether to provide incentives (economic benefits,

² Clawson, Patrick. “U.S.-Iran Relations: A Danger to Gulf Stability.” Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (1/6/05)

³ Perkovich, George. “Iran is Not an Island: A Strategy to Mobilize the Neighbors.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (#34, 02/05)

⁴Perkovich, George. “Iran is Not an Island: A Strategy to Mobilize the Neighbors.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (#34, 02/05)

etc.), disincentives (trade sanctions, possible military action, etc.) or both. Naturally, when negotiating over possible nuclear weapons development, this is a strategic decision which the United States, Germany, Britain and France must work together to settle.

Britain, France and Germany (EU-3) have taken the initiative to work through diplomatic relations with Iran in negotiations to halt any possible further nuclear weapons programs. In recent years, these European countries have promoted engagement with Iran - offering specifically economic incentives and the reverse if their demands were not met. There has been an emphasis on maintaining communication with Iran in order to promote Western goals.⁶ Possible motives for Europe's persistence in negotiating with Iran may rest on historic success in drawing nations away from nuclear weapons programs including South Africa and Ukraine.⁷

The Bush Administration has broken with precedent to be involved, through the EU-3, in dialogue with Iran. U.S. talks with European allies regarding Iran are a significant development, considering years of severed diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran. Now the current strategy of these partners lies with European negotiations over which incentives might convince Iran to reconsider its position. Possible mentioned incentives include an expedited World Trade Organization membership, trade relations or providing passenger jetliner parts.⁸ However, Iranian government officials have expressed that this will not be enough.⁹ Still, United States officials continue to meet with EU-3 counterparts and have thus far been receptive to EU-3 initiatives. It appears that there is an acceptance for European proposals thus far. However, as reported in an article in the Daily Star¹⁰, Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice, mentions that the

⁵ Hulsman & Phillips. "Forging a Common Transatlantic Approach to the Iranian Nuclear Problem" The Heritage Foundation. (3/23/05); Daalder & Levi. "How to Counter Iran's Nuclear Threat." Financial Times (9/24/03)

⁶ Dobbins, James. "In Iran, the U.S. Can't Stay on the Sidelines." Commentary: RAND Corporation. (12/2/04)

⁷ Gordon & Pollack. "America's Refusal to Engage Iran in a Dead End." Chicago Tribune (12/15/04)

⁸ Wright & Baker. "U.S. to Back Europeans on Incentives for Iran." Washington Post (3/11/05)

⁹ Washington Post. "Iran Vows to Resist Pressure to Drop Nuclear Fuel Program." 3/13/05

¹⁰ The Daily Star (Agence France Presse). "U.S. Sets Deadline for EU-Iran Nuclear Talks." (4/15/05)

UN Security Council may be an option in the future. As for future American involvement, Secretary Rice responded that the summer may lead to a reassessment of the Iranian situation. Currently, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rowhani, has made it clear that if Iran did not see any advances in the talks with the EU-3, they would not continue.¹¹

As the current position lies primarily in incentives and oversight, there are still proponents of keeping the option of military action open. The Administration itself has not explicitly said that military means will not be used in these circumstances, and certain intellectual circles would like to leave this option open. John Hulsman and James Phillips¹² of the Heritage Foundation write that incentives alone will not change Iran's course. If an agreement is reached with Tehran, European and American cooperation must include repercussions in the event that Iran does not fulfill its obligations. Hulsman and Phillips also say that any agreement should not specifically rule out the possibility of military intervention in the situation. These disincentives could hold more weight with the Iranian government than economic handouts from Western countries.

Important within the carrot and stick approaches are maintaining channels to gain multinational support – and in turn more pressure on Iran. In the future, the waiting to use the UN Security Council could be part of Western strategy to pursue all diplomatic means before resorting to the weight of the Security Council. If talks fail with Iran, creating multinational support for resulting repercussions against Iran could help create more legitimacy to build support from nations in the region, and hopefully less destabilization.

Consequences of Failed Diplomacy and What Lies Ahead

¹¹ Fathi, Nazila. "Iran Losing Patience With Europe Talks on Nuclear Program." New York Times (4/21/05)

¹² See Hulsman et al. #5

Though there is hope for a positive outcome to the Iran issue, it is necessary to conceptualize what an undesirable outcome may create for world security. In the event that diplomacy and/or threats from the West cannot dissuade Iran from creating nuclear military capabilities, the international community must decide how to act and later how to cope with Iran as a nuclear power in the region and in the world. It is also important to mention that more recent nuclear powers Pakistan and India are in the same neighborhood.

An economic approach, though it would not eliminate nuclear programs or facilities, could cripple Iran. Complete or substantial economic isolation – including severing trade relations and prohibiting Western companies to conduct business within Iran, as the U.S. has already instituted, would almost bring the country to a halt.¹³ However, Iran always has the goldmine of oil. Yet, other sectors of the economy could crumble under the pressure, creating desperate need for materials and an impoverished nation. This however, would create a dire situation for the population. Though if used as a disincentive or a consequence it may eventually bring the Iranian government to its knees.

Military action may offer the only full-proof strategy to ensure that nuclear facilities in Iran are incapable of producing weapons. It is predicted that hardliners in the Bush Administration will assume the failure of diplomacy and pursue a military solution. This could be achieved through air strikes or invasion. Yet many have remarked that there is unsuitable intelligence to know every nuclear target in Iran. Which nations would participate in this sort of action is debatable, as seen with the Iraq war. Would the EU-3 be willing to join in forceful action under the sole conditions that Iran is unresponsive and clearly continuing a nuclear program? Could Israel become involved in a military conflict of this sort? Is the U.S. willing to create another military front in the Middle East? Without EU support, the U.S., if it were to

resort to forceful engagements, could once again be left to internationally unpopular unilateral action. Regardless of how many actors would be militarily involved, evidence shows that forceful means would destabilize the region and even lose support of more U.S. friendly moderate elements in Iran.¹⁴ Not to mention, as Ambassador Robert Hunter notes¹⁵, the effort involved to quell a nationalist, deep-rooted culture and society after military invasion would be immeasurable. This would also imply that the U.S. would be forced to police an enormous territory between Iran and Iraq, while destroying many hopes of possible future allies.

There are moderate elements outside of Europe who do feel that diplomacy is the best and most likely course for achieving a positive outcome. The belief that diplomacy may be possible is clear in the Bush Administration's current strategy to let the EU-3 continue their diplomatic efforts with Iran. Yet hardliners may be quick to try and alter this strategy if there are less than optimal results from Europe.

Important questions for continuing the diplomatic route are how to retain the current suspension of plutonium enrichment that was negotiated by the EU-3 last year. Though the suspension is likely to be extended through recent negotiations, what can be done to continually achieve this hiatus from Iran's nuclear development? Ideally, a solution will be achieved before a suspension is decidedly ended, but the U.S. and the EU-3 are left to offer at least "small" carrots to carry them through the real negotiations for "big" carrots. A possible result from these dilemmas is the establishment of endless discussions about a definitive solution. However, this can be countered with the idea that endless talks simply give endless suspensions and no progress for Iran's nuclear program. This of course is based upon the premise that Iran is not secretly continuing their efforts for nuclear weapons.

¹³ Karnitschnig, Matthew. "European Firms React to U.S. Hard Line on Iran." Wall Street Journal (1/28/2005)

¹⁴ Borchgrave, Arnaud de. "Iran in Bombsights." The Washington Times. (7/5/04)

For the time being, Iranian President Khatami has announced that Iran is militarily ready to defend its borders and independence if any outside military action is imminent. His nation possesses ballistic missiles that can threaten the region, including U.S. military bases, and they could be launched to reach as far as Europe.¹⁶ This gives a little less force to any parties pushing for a military option.

It is also significant to address the effects on the region. Another future situation, according to Richard Russell¹⁷ at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, would be the creation of an environment for a Middle East arms race. Given that already Israel, and possibly Iran, would have the capacity to possess and create nuclear weapons, there would be an inherent insecurity for surrounding nations and a resulting power struggle. Quite clearly, a situation worse than having Iran added to the nuclear powers list is to have many other contenders on the list, as they struggle for parity amidst new conditions for regional security. For example, also mentioned by Russell, it may be surmised that Egypt's diminished status in regional politics could be revived through nuclear options. Nuclear weapons might be seen as the only means of unquestioned security for the other nations in the Middle East.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that Iran must not acquire nuclear weapons capabilities. It would be a disaster for regional security, stabilization and international security as a whole. At this moment, the hope lies within negotiations between the Europeans and the Iranians, with the United States as an engaged, active participant in the development of these negotiations. Every option of diplomacy, without Iranian delays, must be expended before instituting severe consequences

¹⁵ Hunter, Robert. "Talk It Out on Iran Before It's Too Late." Commentary: RAND Corporation. (8/27/04)

¹⁶ Reuters. "Iran's Khatami Says Army Ready to Repel Strikes." The New York Times. (4/18/04)

¹⁷ Russell, Richard. "Beyond Iran: The Risk of a Nuclearizing Middle East." Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (2/15/05)

militarily or economically. It seems apparent that Iran is not going to be placated by economic gifts from the West. As numerous experts agree, there must be a stick involved in the negotiations to “inspire” the Iranians to meet Western demands. The West cannot afford to settle for meeting the Iranian government halfway. Western demands must be binding through written resolutions/treaties and comprehensive inspections – along with destroying components used for creating weapons. Regarding military action, other than air strikes on nuclear facilities, a full invasion of Iran does not seem feasible or advisable. Now it remains to be seen how long the Iranian government will resist Western pressures.
