

Not by Sanctions Alone: Using Intelligence and Military Means to Bolster Diplomacy with Iran

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Brief Analysis

To bolster diplomacy with Iran, the United States must intensify intelligence operations and more actively use the military instrument to alter Tehran's threat calculus.

With the latest round of nuclear diplomacy ending inconclusively last week, the United States and the EU are poised to impose a new round of sanctions on Iran. Given Tehran's large cash and gold reserves and still-substantial oil income, however, sanctions alone may not make the regime more flexible in negotiations. To bolster diplomacy, and thereby diminish the prospects of military confrontation, the United States must intensify intelligence operations and use the military instrument in ways it has not been willing to thus far.

RATCHETING UP THE PRESSURE

Since taking office, the Obama administration has been extremely reticent to employ the military instrument in dealing with Tehran, largely to avoid undermining nuclear diplomacy or sparking an unintended conflict. To its credit, the administration has built up the military capabilities of U.S. allies in the region, filled gaps in U.S. defenses in the Persian Gulf, and defined red lines regarding the use of force. Yet these steps do not seem to have altered Tehran's threat calculus. If diplomacy is to succeed, the United States must do just that.

Strengthening partnerships. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has stated that strengthened security partnerships and collective defenses are key to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Building on the efforts of its predecessors, the Obama administration has sought to advance these goals through the Gulf Security Dialogue and tens of billions of dollars in planned arms sales to Gulf Arab allies. The intent is to reassure these allies while convincing Iran that its nuclear program will diminish, rather than enhance its security.

Tehran, however, believes that the Gulf Arab monarchies are doomed to be swept away by the "Islamic awakening" now convulsing the region, and that their armed forces will eventually be inherited by revolutionary Islamist

regimes more closely aligned with its own worldview. From that perspective, Gulf Arab militaries pose no threat to Iran, so U.S. efforts to build them up have no effect on Tehran's threat calculus.

Filling capabilities gaps. Following an internal review in 2011 that revealed critical gaps in U.S. warfighting capabilities in the Gulf, CENTCOM ordered a rush effort to enhance the readiness of U.S. forces there. These upgrades -- along with the dispatch of additional mine countermeasure ships and helicopters to the region, as well as the refitting of the amphibious transport dock USS *Ponce* to function as an afloat staging base for countermine and naval special warfare operations in the Gulf -- will help U.S. forces deal with small boat, mine, and submarine warfare threats. Yet, because none of these necessary steps enhances America's offensive potential in the Gulf, they are unlikely to alter Tehran's threat calculus.

Drawing red lines. President Obama and Secretary Panetta have declared that if Iran were to begin building a nuclear weapon, the United States would use all means at its disposal to prevent completion of the project. (They have also warned Tehran that any attempt to block the Strait of Hormuz would prompt U.S. military action.) Recent media reports of U.S. and Israeli cyber-spying on Tehran have undoubtedly caused some Iranian officials to wonder whether they could build a bomb in secret, should they decide to do so. But that may be beside the point: because Washington has set the bar so high with its red line concerning Tehran's nuclear program, Iran could make great progress toward acquiring the bomb, all through overt activities, without risking U.S. military action.

NEXT STEPS

Successful diplomacy may well depend on the administration's ability to convince Tehran that the price of failed negotiations could be armed conflict. To make this threat credible, Washington must first show Tehran that it is preparing for a possible military confrontation -- whether initiated by Iran or a third country -- and that it is willing and able to enforce its red lines regarding freedom of navigation in the Gulf and the regime's nuclear program.

PRESSURE DAMASCUS TO UNNERVE TEHRAN

The Obama administration's understandable caution regarding the Syria crisis has had the unfortunate side effect of convincing Tehran that Washington lacks the resolve to deal with its nuclear challenge. To help dispel this impression, Washington should more vigorously support the armed opposition in Syria, Tehran's closest regional ally. The key is to provide enough support to enable the opposition to turn the tide in Syria, yet without drawing the United States so deeply into the crisis that it diverts resources and attention from the Iranian nuclear issue.

BOOST READINESS

The United States should take additional steps to demonstrate that it is preparing for a possible military confrontation with Iran, whether as a result of an Israeli preventive strike or an Iranian provocation. For instance, it should enhance security around embassies and military facilities, raise the threat condition for its forces in the region, and undertake other steps that suggest it is preparing for the kind of turmoil a confrontation with Iran might bring. U.S. agencies and local allies should also step up surveillance of Iranian intelligence personnel serving under diplomatic and nonofficial cover in the region, making it more difficult for them to plan or implement retaliatory action.

In addition, the U.S. military should increase the pace of bilateral and multilateral exercises in the Gulf in order to demonstrate that both Washington and the Gulf Cooperation Council are ready to confront Tehran. Acting within a coalition framework is particularly important, as it would lend legitimacy to any future military operation. In particular, the United States should undertake exercises that demonstrate its ability to rapidly surge forces into the region. Finally, Washington should publicize major milestones in the development, production, and deployment of the upgraded 30,000-pound "massive ordnance penetrator" bomb, currently being developed to deal with Iran's

deep underground uranium enrichment facility at Fordow.

REPOSITION GULF NAVAL FORCES

On the naval front, Washington should move the aircraft carrier that it currently keeps on station in the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman. There, it would be much less vulnerable to an Iranian surprise attack and much better positioned to wage the kind of "outside-in" campaign that would provide the least costly way to restore freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf in the event of confrontation. Senior Iranian officers have stated that the carrier is a strategic prize they could hold at risk given its current location; temporarily repositioning it would deny them a major advantage in the event of conflict.

At the same time, to prevent Tehran from credibly claiming that it chased the U.S. military out of the Persian Gulf, Washington should continue to maintain other naval forces there while deploying additional strike aircraft and bombers to the southern Gulf states and elsewhere in the region. It should also quietly explain to allies that the carrier's repositioning is a temporary expedient intended to better position U.S. forces to deal with a potential confrontation with Iran.

"OUT" TEHRAN'S OPERATIVES

Should nuclear negotiations continue to languish, thereby increasing the prospects for confrontation, the United States should do what it did in the wake of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia: identify to friendly nations any Iranian intelligence operatives serving on their soil under diplomatic or nonofficial cover. This would hinder Iran's ability to carry out a wave of terrorist attacks or otherwise retaliate in the event of an Israeli preventive strike or clash in the Gulf.

All of the above steps would demonstrate that Washington believes there is heightened potential for conflict in the Gulf while simultaneously enhancing U.S. readiness for such an eventuality. They would also allow the administration to avoid overtly threatening Tehran in ways that could divide the P5+1, cause Iran to dig in its heels in order to save face, or prompt it to overreact.

CONCLUSION

If nuclear diplomacy with Tehran is to succeed, Washington must be prepared for the kind of brinkmanship it has not engaged in since the Cold War. This means ratcheting up pressure, while, backstopping diplomacy with preparations that underscore its readiness for a confrontation, in order to deter Iran from additional steps toward a nuclear breakout. To this end, Washington should reinforce three key notions in Tehran: that the Iranian nuclear program has been penetrated by foreign intelligence services, that the regime would not be able to conduct a clandestine breakout without getting caught, and that if it does try to build a nuclear weapon, the United States will destroy its nuclear infrastructure. In this way, the administration would make clear to Tehran that the only way to obtain sanctions relief, escape from its growing isolation, and avert the possibility of war is through a diplomatic solution -- one that meets Iran's desire for peaceful nuclear technology without allowing for the possibility of a breakout.

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