Rolling Back Tehran's Veil of Nuclear Ambiguity

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Brief Analysis

Unless the United States reverses the current dynamic, Iran could reap the perceived benefits of being a nuclear power even without building a bomb.

In recent weeks, the Iranian government has made a number of statements regarding its nuclear intentions: that it will move production of more highly enriched uranium to an underground facility near Qom by year's end; that although it has forsworn nuclear weapons, if it did go for the bomb, no one could stop it; and that it has deployed Shahab missiles in hardened underground silos. Taken together, these statements add new wrinkles to Tehran's policy of nuclear ambiguity. The regime's goal is to confound efforts to halt the nuclear program while creating the impression that it is a de facto nuclear power, thereby enhancing its regional influence.

Elements of Ambiguity

Iran's policy of ambiguity consists of three elements: dual-use facilities, mixed messages, and surrogate capabilities.

Dual-use facilities. Nearly all major elements of Iran's nuclear infrastructure are inherently dual use. For instance, the enrichment facilities at Natanz and Qom are allegedly intended to produce fuel for the nuclear power plant at Bushehr and for a series of research reactors, all but one of which are yet to be built. Although both facilities are much too small for substantial fuel-production purposes, they are perfectly suited to producing enriched uranium for a weapons program. Indeed, Tehran's announcement that it will be moving production of 20 percent enriched uranium to an underground facility in a mountain near Qom and tripling production there via advanced centrifuges could dramatically shorten the time required for a nuclear breakout to a matter of weeks. Although 20 percent enriched uranium is not weapons grade, it can be further enriched to that threshold much more quickly than Iran's large stockpile of 3.5 percent uranium. The Qom facility also demonstrates the degree to which Tehran is hardening parts of its program against a preventive strike, hinting at the kind of clandestine enrichment capabilities that might exist elsewhere and contributing to the perception of inevitable nuclear progress.

Mixed messages and double entendres. Since December 2006, President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad has repeatedly declared that Iran is a "nuclear power," using the term in a way that plays on its multiple meanings. He has also repeatedly stated that "Iran's nuclear train has no brake and no reverse gear," further contributing to the perception of inevitability. In June 2011, he declared, "When we say we do not want to make a bomb, it means we do not want to," although "if we want to, we are not afraid...to announce it" because "no one can do a damn thing" about it. And in April, the website Gerdab posted an entry by an independent blogger speculating that nothing much would change in the wake of a hypothetical Iranian nuclear test. Publicizing such views on Gerdab -- a website affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps -- may indicate that they broadly conform to official Iranian thinking on a topic whose treatment in the media is tightly controlled by the government.

Surrogate capabilities. Iran has built an arsenal of several hundred Shahab-type missiles armed with conventional warheads. Because they are not proscribed by arms-control treaties, the regime frequently displays them in parades and exercises, underscoring its ability to respond to a strike against its nuclear infrastructure and exploiting the perceived connection between ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. To this end, missiles on parade are frequently festooned with banners proclaiming that "Israel should be wiped off the map" (an unattainable goal for conventional weapons). And in June 2011, Tehran revealed an underground silo complex housing Shahab-type missiles, replete with overhead steel and concrete blast doors. The regime likely wants its adversaries to believe that it would not invest such significant resources to protect conventionally armed missiles.

Next Steps

The perception of Iran's nuclear progress has altered regional political dynamics and heightened Arab and Israeli anxieties. Several neighbors (including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) are reinforcing their conventional military capabilities. And some countries (e.g., Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE) have taken steps toward creating civilian nuclear programs, perhaps with an eye toward an eventual military nuclear option. In addition, several states adopted more accommodating stances toward Tehran before the Arab Spring derailed relations (e.g., Oman, Qatar, and the Saudis permitted port calls by Iranian warships). They also moved to strengthen ties with the United States due to fears about growing Iranian influence.

Going forward, Tehran has several options, each facilitated to some degree by its policy of ambiguity:

- Continue paving the way for a "slow-motion breakout" without actually taking such a step, reasoning that it is already deriving many of the benefits of possessing nuclear weapons without paying the price of a breakout.
- "Sneak out" by creating a small, secret nuclear arsenal. Should Iran attempt to create a weapon at a clandestine facility (presumably what it had in mind for Natanz and Qom before their existence became public), Israel or the United States might not detect it in time to act. After all, the information that led U.S. intelligence to assess that Iran had suspended its weaponization efforts in 2003 did not arrive until mid-2007. Even after sneaking out, Iran might keep its arsenal a secret, continuing its policy of ambiguity for as long as possible in order to avert new sanctions.
- Break out via a public announcement or weapons test. Although some countries would likely treat such a move as a long-anticipated development that they were prepared to live with (as predicted by the aforementioned Gerdab blog), others would make Iran pay a high political and economic price for it.

Implications

At the international level, Iran's policy of ambiguity has complicated efforts to strengthen UN sanctions against the regime. Absent unambiguous proof of a weapons program, few countries are willing to impose harsher sanctions against the Iranian oil industry.

Tehran's policy also complicates U.S. efforts to establish a regional security architecture to contain and deter a

nuclear Iran. As demonstrated by the firestorm that greeted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's July 2009 statement regarding a U.S. "defense umbrella" for the region, such declarations could lead friends and allies to believe that Washington has reconciled itself to Iran's eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons, thereby advancing Tehran's goal of being treated as a nuclear power.

To address these major challenges and pierce Tehran's veil of ambiguity, the United States should take the following steps:

- Obtain and disseminate detailed, accurate intelligence regarding Iran's proscribed nuclear activities.
- Conduct an information campaign that counters Tehran's triumphalist narrative portraying itself as a rising power.
- Launch a sustained effort to repair ties with regional allies whose confidence in Washington has been shaken by its handling of the Arab Spring.
- Offer proof of its willingness to push back against aggressive Iranian policies, such as Tehran's support for Iraqi Shiite "special groups" that attack U.S. troops.

At the moment, both U.S. and Iranian policymakers are pursuing policies of delay, each betting that time is on their side. Washington seems to believe that delaying Iran's nuclear progress buys time for economic sanctions to bite, and for fresh intelligence that could facilitate stronger sanctions. Tehran seems to believe that its "salami tactics" and ambiguity turn U.S. delays to Iran's advantage, with incremental progress that is slow enough to avoid mobilizing the entire international community against it but sufficient to create the perception of inevitable nuclearization.

Although it remains to be seen which side will be proven right, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the status quo does not serve Washington's interests. The United States must reverse the current dynamic if it is to prevent Iran from being seen as a de facto nuclear power -- a perception that would enable it to derive many of the perceived benefits of proliferation even without building the bomb.

Michael Eisenstadt is director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. ❖

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