Too Little, Too Late?

Nuclear Security and the Middle East

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

On April 5, 2010, Gregory Schulte, George Perkovich, and Simon Henderson addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the implications of regional nuclear proliferation in the context of the April 12-13 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington. Ambassador Schulte, who served as U.S. representative at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna from 2005 to 2009, is a senior visiting fellow at the National Defense University's Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Dr. Perkovich is vice president for studies and director of the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Mr. Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the **Gulf and Energy Policy Program (/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)** at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Note: The opinions expressed in Ambassador Schulte's presentation are his own and not necessarily those of the National Defense University or the U.S. government.

Gregory Schulte

A year ago in Prague, President Obama warned that nuclear terrorism poses "the most immediate and extreme threat to global security." Accordingly, he vowed to lead an international effort to "secure all vulnerable nuclear materials around the world in four years." The Nuclear Security Summit is intended to advance that goal.

Although preventing nuclear terrorism sits high on our list of national security priorities, many governments in the Middle East and elsewhere do not see it as a major issue. Diplomats from developing countries often regard it as an American obsession and worry that it will create another barrier to the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Therefore, one of the president's very simple but vital goals at the summit will be to encourage other states to treat nuclear security more seriously. The Middle East is, after all, a potential victim of nuclear terrorism, not just a potential source.

Nuclear security will become all the more important in the region as more countries seek to benefit from civil nuclear power. But the most immediate problem is not nuclear security per se, but rather Iran's nuclear program. Tehran seems to have calculated that the prestige, influence, and security provided by nuclear weapons outweigh whatever condemnation and sanctions emerge from the ongoing multilateral process. The United States must therefore base its plans and diplomacy on the assumption that Iran will have nuclear weapons.

Once nuclear armed, Iran's leaders may not be so suicidal as to launch nuclear attacks against Israel, the United States, or other partners in the region. They may, however, engage in nuclear brinksmanship -- dangerous, escalatory behavior aimed at intimidating neighbors, detering outside intervention, or impressing their own public. Compounding this danger is the real risk that others in the Middle East may decide to acquire their own nuclear arsenals. Candidate proliferants include Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and perhaps even Turkey, the NATO ally which actually borders Iran. No country that aspires to regional leadership will want to be the last to acquire nuclear weapons.

Had the United States been able to threaten crippling sanctions and offer serious inducements a number of years ago, Tehran's approach might have changed. Regrettably, it may now be too late to avoid a nuclear Iran. But it is certainly not too late for a concerted effort to contain the dangers posed by a nuclear-armed Iran and prevent another round of proliferation that could make the danger of nuclear terrorism all the more frightening.

Specifically, the United States and NATO should reinforce their collective ability to protect the alliance's territory, populations, and regional interests. Together with conventional capabilities and phased adaptive missile defense, NATO's nuclear forces may still have a contribution to make: first by deterring Iran's leaders from exploiting their nuclear arms, and second by reassuring partners who might otherwise seek their own nuclear weapons.

In addition, the United States should continue to discourage the spread of sensitive technologies that can be used to build nuclear weapons. It must also reinforce its ability to detect and investigate clandestine nuclear activities. Finally, it should step up international efforts to interdict illicit trafficking in nuclear material, especially among countries that lie on maritime routes used by North Korea, such as China, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

George Perkovich

If "nuclear security" means the security of nuclear material, then the forecast is relatively positive -- of all the big problems in the world, this is one of the more manageable. The number of sites where such material exists is limited, and securing them is not complicated.

But if "nuclear security" means the broader understanding of security that motivates states to seek nuclear weapons, then the situation is not as promising. For Iran, the 1980s were a very insecure period, with the Iran-Iraq War providing the initial motivation for Tehran's clandestine effort to enrich uranium and move toward producing nuclear weapons.

Although much of the world is worried about Iran, next month's Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference will make clear to Washington that there are other elements of nuclear security on the international community's agenda. With around 190 countries meeting for a month in New York to discuss nuclear issues, there will likely be daily references to Israel's nuclear status and what the United States is doing to address it.

But Washington may be better positioned at that conference than it has been in the past. The widespread international fondness for President Obama will work to the administration's advantage. In addition, Obama will have made a number of moves prior to the NPT conference that emphasize the U.S. desire to reduce nuclear weapons and their role in foreign policy, such as signing the renewed Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russian president Dmitry Medvedev this week and participating in the Nuclear Security Summit next week.

Although it is probably too late to stop Iran from mastering nuclear enrichment, the international community can still induce the regime to eschew weaponization. The decision and set of activities needed to actually make nuclear weapons constitute a distinct line -- a fact that has not been lost on Iran. The regime's leaders know that crossing this line would be very dangerous, and they may not have made up their mind yet about whether they want to do so.

Simon Henderson

If Iran became a nuclear-armed state, many observers believe that Saudi Arabia would ask Pakistan for some sort of nuclear umbrella. The most frequently mentioned idea is that Islamabad would deploy nuclear missiles to the kingdom as a means of deterring Iranian threats. Apparently, such an arrangement would not break international agreements so long as the weapons remained under Pakistani control. This scenario is purely speculative at the moment, at least based on publicly available evidence -- in fact, it has been met with a range of denials. But the close diplomatic relationship between the two countries is clear.

Although economic and financial sanctions might delay a nuclear breakout, they would not necessarily change Iran's behavior. The regime's leaders are pursuing weaponization because they believe it will guarantee the Islamic Republic's security while giving them the domestic prestige of having made Iran a nuclear power. They also probably share the North Korean view of nuclear weapons, seeing them as a way to deter international "bullying," particularly by the United States. The quandary is how to convince Tehran that having nuclear weapons carries a price it cannot afford.

Aside from the Iranian issue, preventing the spread of nuclear technology and know-how will be a permanent headache. For example, how will the United Arab Emirates' planned nuclear power stations affect regional proliferation? The country does not have enough citizens with the relevant technical skills to staff these facilities, so from where will it recruit such workers? Pakistan, for one, has a nuclear establishment estimated at more than 10,000 people. Even if the emirates continue to forsake nuclear weapons and the technologies needed to create plutonium and highly enriched uranium, Pakistani technicians working there could still foster an unfortunate regional cross-fertilization of nuclear knowledge and skills.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Max Mealy. ❖

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