

Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Ambitions, Post-Lebanon

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In-Depth Reports

On September 17, 2006, Shahram Chubin and Gary Samore addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Dr. Chubin is director of studies and joint course director at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and author of *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (2006). Dr. Samore is incoming director of studies for the Council on Foreign Relations and current vice president of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Program on Global Security and Sustainability. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SHAHRAM CHUBIN

According to the Iranian regime's standard narrative of victimization, the United States has sought to hold back the Islamic Republic's progress for generations through deliberate interference and discrimination. Indeed, Tehran is driven by a profound desire for recognition on the international stage. The hardliners who have consolidated power in recent years view nuclear development in particular as an issue of respect, equality, and pride. They believe that the region is in strategic flux, and that the United States and Israel -- together with secular Middle Eastern states -- seek to challenge them by imposing regional hegemony and controlling resources. In response, they have cast the Palestinian territories as the front line in Iran's defense and employed asymmetric strategies -- namely, supporting and training terrorists worldwide -- to counter their enemies.

Yet, despite the hardliners' firm grip on power, the regime is not monolithic. A dialogue exists among the elites, with hardliners and reformers each presenting alternative strategies for the country's future. The divisions between these constituencies pose far-reaching consequences for Iran's nuclear efforts. Although the nuclear issue is not open to public debate, it is firmly grounded in the domestic political dialogue, which has witnessed a shift in strategic rationale over the past several years. Hardliners see Iran as the vanguard for advancing the Islamic revolution and as the eventual dominant power in the region, while reformers deemphasize their country's role in extending the revolution beyond its borders. More specifically, hardliners tend to advocate confrontation with the West and adherence to the fundamentals of the revolution -- namely, the use of military and security forces to carry out policies domestically and internationally. Reformers see Iran more as a "normal" state engaged in relations with the rest of the world; consequently, they would be more likely to make a "grand bargain" with the West.

Nuclear Goals?

Iran's nuclear activities are a persistent venture, not a crash program. The regime has only accelerated these activities since the international community discovered its clandestine uranium enrichment program in 2002. The hardliners believe that the region has become a particularly dangerous neighborhood in light of recent developments. Accordingly, Tehran seems to view the nuclear program as necessary for deterring U.S. efforts in the Middle East and casting itself as the defender of the Muslim world.

Although the Iranians have adopted an opportunistic approach on the nuclear issue, they have not fully formulated their goals. If possible, they would like to remain compliant with the Non-Proliferation Treaty and avoid actually

breaking out with nuclear weapons, largely because they have no idea what they would do following such a breakout. In general, they want what many other nations want: the benefits of nuclear capabilities without the problems. Their only discernible strategy seems to involve pushing hard until they hit a brick wall. Unfortunately, such an approach carries a high risk of miscalculation.

To complicate matters further, the regime has an unhealthy self-absorption and a general obliviousness to others' perceptions, both of which serve to disconnect it from the world. Iran's leaders are tactically astute but strategically incompetent, often exhibiting a fascination with complexity for its own sake. These factors combine to make Iran a formidable diplomatic opponent, as witnessed in recent months.

Despite these obstacles, sanctions can have an impact on Iran. For example, robust penalties that measurably affected energy prices could reinforce moderate elements in Iranian society and empower the public to alter the regime's calculus. The regime could go so far as to halt the nuclear program entirely for fear of its own marginalization or demise.

GARY SAMORE

Although current diplomatic efforts are unlikely to halt Iran's nuclear activities completely, they could buy the United States and its allies some time. The various inducements and threats on display are not powerful enough to convince Iranian elites to end the enrichment program they value so highly. Instead, they see a window of opportunity to advance the program while the major powers are divided and U.S. energy prices are high. For purely tactical reasons, however, they may accept delays if such an approach would more effectively divide the international community and forestall punitive action.

Currently, technical difficulties are the primary obstacle preventing Iran from accelerating its nuclear program. The regime is unable to produce reliable centrifuges, a necessary component for enriching uranium. The International Atomic Energy Agency has confirmed a high rate of centrifuge failure in Iran, so the regime may still be several years away from constructing a large facility capable of producing enough enriched uranium for multiple nuclear weapons.

Eventually, though, Tehran will overcome its technical problems. At that point, diplomatic efforts would stall, and the United States and its allies would be left with a difficult choice between two extremely unattractive options: containment through alliances and threats of retaliation or confrontation through attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities.

The international community may yet be able to strike a deal with Iran to suspend enrichment, but new talks are unlikely to reach a final agreement. Despite accepting narrow inspections designed to promote confidence that its nuclear facilities will not be used for military purposes, Iran has consistently rejected more far-reaching Western demands. The Europeans have offered civilian nuclear assistance as their main incentive to Tehran, including a guarantee to supply nuclear fuel. This would indeed be an attractive option for the regime if the program's true purpose were civilian in nature. Since Iran's objective is to develop nuclear weapons, however, the offer is not appealing.

Several different compromises have been proposed in the past. Yet, even if one could trust Iran to keep its promises, the time for compromise has passed. The best moment for such an approach would have been immediately after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when Tehran likely perceived itself as the next target. Today, however, Iran would view a suspension of enrichment as merely a chance to buy time under the guise of international negotiations, until it again judged that the political conditions were ripe for resuming the program. Moreover, the technical significance of a suspension has probably been undercut because certain facilities have not been subject to inspection since January 2006, giving Tehran time to establish a small-scale, clandestine research program if it so desired. Such a program

would be difficult to detect and could continue operating even as negotiations progress.

Sanctions and Military Intervention

If diplomacy fails, the remaining options are unattractive. Although the threat of sanctions has been a useful diplomatic tool, both Russia and China would resist actual enforcement of punitive measures, thereby rendering them ineffective. In fact, simply formulating and reaching consensus on tough sanctions -- the kind of significant economic restrictions necessary to make Iran think twice about resuming its nuclear activities -- would be difficult. Even if such sanctions were somehow enacted and enforced, however, their impact would not be felt in time to forestall Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons.

If all else fails, the United States and Israel could risk military intervention. In order to be effective, however, such action would require far more intelligence data than either party currently seems to hold on Iranian nuclear facilities. Moreover, a military campaign would incur the risk of indirect Iranian retaliation against both American and Israeli interests (e.g., through Hizballah attacks or violent interference in Iraq).

In the long term, a combination of diplomacy and international action will buy some time, and Iran is still several years away from achieving a nuclear weapons capability. The Iranians play a shrewd diplomatic game, however. They have demonstrated that their nuclear activities are more than just a crash program, and they are willing to wait for the optimal time to actually produce nuclear weapons -- making it difficult for the United States and its partners to perceive when the "red line" has been crossed. And when Iran does develop nuclear weapons in a few years, the West will face a stark choice between containment and preemption.

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