

Act Now to Deter and Contain Iran

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Articles & Testimony

For the last year, Iran has been successfully gaming the international diplomatic process, stalling while its nuclear program moves inexorably forward. We need to make time work for us, not against us. The best way to do that is to take bold and immediate steps to deter and contain Iran -- almost like a Cold War on a small scale.

We need to show Iran's hard-line leaders that their nuclear program hurts Iran's security rather than helps it, namely, that Iran is starting an arms race it will lose because the United States and Iran's neighbors will respond.

So long as its hard-line leaders are convinced that the West has no military option, they see little reason to freeze their nuclear enrichment and conversion. Unfortunately, Iran's leaders have persuaded themselves that the West will not dare attack their nuclear facilities because they could, in retaliation, disrupt oil shipments from the Gulf. As Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei put it June 4, "If the Americans make a wrong move toward Iran, the shipment of energy will definitely face danger, and the Americans would not be able to protect energy supply in the region."

This is no idle threat. In March 2005, Defense Intelligence Agency Director Vice Adm. Lowell E. Jacoby told Congress, "We judge Iran can briefly close the Strait of Hormuz, relying on a layered strategy using predominantly naval, air and some ground forces." Ali-Ashgar Kazemi, a retired Iranian admiral now a political science professor at Tehran University, recently explained, "Iranians are preparing for guerrilla war at sea. . . . In an enclosed, narrow and rather shallow region such as the Persian Gulf, this tactic can be very decisive against large units." As Riad Khawaji warned in the May 8, 2006, *Defense News* ("Iran Plans for Attrition War in the Gulf"), "Iran could sortie nearly 400 small, high-speed craft armed with rocket launchers, torpedoes and mines."

Trans-Atlantic Cooperation

We need to change Iran's conviction that it wins from confrontation -- and we need to prepare for what Iran might do if we have to use force. We should speed deployment to the Gulf of the new Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) with their advanced mine counter-measure capabilities, including unmanned underwater vehicles. We should step up our efforts with our coalition partners to defend Gulf waters, building on some recent successes. A January 2004 Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) exercise, *Sea Saber*, tracked a dummy proliferation shipment from the Northern Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz into the North Arabian Sea -- participants included the United States,

Great Britain, Canada, France, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Japan and Australia, with observers from Denmark, Germany, Poland, Turkey and Portugal. Also, starting in October 2001, Task Force 151 has patrolled the Gulf and Arabian Seas, querying more than 1,000 ships a month and boarding more than 25 a month, with ships from the United States, Great Britain, Canada, France, Italy, Greece and New Zealand. Were a similar force to be assembled -- or even just an exercise announced -- to protect Gulf shipping from mine and missile threats, the point would be made to Iran that their bellicose statements are cementing a coalition against them.

Besides protecting shipping, another front on which to contain and deter Iran is to reinforce NATO's commitment to the defense of Turkey from threats to the East, which was in some doubt after the disagreements about NATO deployments to Turkey in the buildup to the Iraq war. After all, a nuclear-armed Iran could decide that it could with impunity return to sponsoring the PKK Kurdish terrorists as it did in the 1990s or that it could support armed Islamists opposing the Turkish secular state. NATO military planners are not necessarily overly burdened right now -- it would be useful if they were tasked to prepare more detailed plans for the defense of Turkey. It would be helpful if European Union (EU) members actively promoted such NATO plans -- after all, if the accession talks with Turkey succeed, the EU will have a 300-mile border with Iran.

Strengthening trans-Atlantic cooperation about the Iranian threat would be a good way to point out to Iran how their nuclear activities are driving the United States and Europe together to oppose Iranian dreams of being the regional superpower over the objections of their neighbors.

Another part of containment can be economic pressure. United Nations Security Council sanctions are a crude tool, and getting them approved is a time-consuming process which may in the end fail. In the meantime, America and its friends can apply "de facto sanctions." For instance, strict U.S. Treasury application of existing rules to prevent transfer of funds to terrorists or in support of WMD proliferation led the two largest Swiss banks to decide recently that Iran was just not an attractive place to do business, so they closed up shop there.

Containment and deterrence need not be only sticks -- it can also take the form of carrots. Cold-War-style confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) and arms control measures could provide gains for the West while addressing legitimate Iranian security concerns, as distinct from its unacceptable ambitions. One example would be an agreement to reduce the risk of incidents at sea between the U.S. and Iranian navies. Another example would be an agreement to exchange observers during military exercises in the region. At the very least, making such offers would show to Europe, Russia and China that the United States is prepared to walk the extra mile in the effort to accommodate Iran's legitimate security concerns.

A further security inducement which the United States could offer would be to address the reported concern that the Bush Administration's real goal is regime change in Iran. It would be inappropriate for the U.S. government to offer any security guarantees to the Iranian or any other government: What government is in power in another country is up to the people of that country to decide. But what Washington could offer Tehran would be a "conditional security assurance" -- jargon for the simple proposition, "We will not attack you if you do not attack us."

There are good prospects that pressure on Iran would persuade its leaders to freeze their overt nuclear program. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wants a confrontation, but Iran's president has not been a particularly powerful figure in foreign or security affairs, as the outside world discovered when its high hopes about Mohammed Khatami's 1997-2005 efforts at political reform came to naught. Real power in Iran is held by revolutionary leaders, especially Supreme Leader Khamenei -- whose powers are exactly what the title suggests. For the last 18 years, Khamenei has been very comfortable with low-level confrontation with the West -- just enough to keep the revolutionary spirit alive, but not enough to risk open hostilities. For now, Khamenei seems to think that the West for all its rhetoric will do nothing to stop Ahmadinejad, so why not let him push ahead. Our task is to persuade Khamenei that Ahmadinejad's confrontational stance is too costly for Iran. ❖

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