Influencing Iran's Nuclear Activities through Major Power Cooperation

by Patrick Clawson **(/experts/patrick-clawson)**

Dec 30, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Brief Analysis

This is the second in a two-part series on diplomacy surrounding the Iranian nuclear program. Read Part I. **(templateC05.php?CID=2205)**

The Iran nuclear issue will be on the international agenda in the coming months. The often-postponed visit to Tehran by the head of Russia's Atomic Energy Agency (Minatom) Alexander Rumyantsev to sign an agreement on the delivery of nuclear fuel for the Bushehr power plant is now set for January. Meanwhile, early January will see the second round of negotiations between the Europeans and Iran, which is insisting it will end its voluntary suspension of uranium enrichment unless there is significant progress within the three-month timeframe set in the November 15 Paris Accords. That is no easy matter, given that in response to Iran's demands that the negotiations cover a wide range of security and economic issues, the initial European position evidently was to raise the full set of concerns which led to suspension of EU-Iran talks about a Trade Cooperation Agreement, namely, terrorism (such as al-Qaeda), Middle East peace, human rights, and all of Iran's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

While it will be difficult for Europe to reach agreement with Iran in the current talks, the record shows that when Iran has been convinced that it faced a united insistence by the major powers, then it has made major concessions. That was the lesson of the October 2003 Iranian suspension of uranium enrichment and of the November 2004 Paris Accords. Now, the key issue is what are the stances of the permanent members (P-5) of the Security Council, especially Russia and China. Securing their cooperation should be the focus of U.S. diplomacy regarding Iran's nuclear program in the coming months.

Major Powers Can Agree About Nonproliferation, Not about Iran

If the Iran nuclear issue is framed as a question of geostrategic cooperation with the United States to limit Iranian influence, the chances of either Russian or Chinese assistance are slight. Russia is not necessarily interested in helping the United States right now, given disagreements about such issues as the recent developments in Ukraine. And unlike its many challenges to U.S. interests, Iran has done little to threaten Russia in such vulnerable areas as among Chechen Muslims, plus it is a valuable trading partner for Russia.

China also has reasons to want to limit U.S. influence, which could lead it to enjoy complicating U.S. efforts about

Iran. Plus China is eager to cultivate political relationships with energy suppliers, rather than simply relying on market forces to assure access to the ever-increasing oil and gas imports China's growing economy needs. In October, the Chinese state oil firm Sinopec was awarded development rights to Iran's Yadavaran oil field, slated to produce 150,000 barrels a day, in return for agreeing to purchase 10 million tons of liquefied natural gas a year (equivalent to about 240,000 barrels a day) for 25 years in a deal the Chinese media valued as worth $70 billion.

But if the issue is framed as nuclear proliferation rather than Iran, the issues posed by Iran's nuclear program look quite different for Russia and China. Both of those powers have reasons to oppose nuclear proliferation by medium-sized powers. Russia's claim to be a great power rests in no small part on its nuclear arms; were a dozen or more countries to have long-range nuclear missiles, then Russia's status would be less unique. If the Treaty on Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) were to be grievously weakened and nuclear proliferation to be common, then China would have to worry about the intentions of several East Asian countries such as Japan and Taiwan, both of which have extensive nuclear capabilities from which they could readily build large numbers of weapons.

Iran's nuclear program, if unchecked, could well lead to further proliferation. The most obvious concern would be among Iran's neighbors. Mustafa Kibaroglu of Bilkent and Harvard Universities warns, "voices are starting to be heard from within Turkish society promoting the idea of going nuclear" in response to developments in Iran (Kibaoglu, "Iran's Nuclear Program May Trigger the Young Turks to Think Nuclear, " Carnegie Endowment Non-Proliferation Project, December 22, 2004). A September 18, 2003, report entitled "Saudis Consider Nuclear Bomb" in the British Guardian newspaper was based on serious Saudi thought about the implications of Iranian developments, as analyzed in **PolicyWatch 793 (templateC05.php?CID=1671)** ("Toward a Saudi Nuclear Option" by Simon Henderson, October 16, 2003, exploring the substance behind widespread rumors Pakistan might help Saudi Arabia on nuclear matters).

Given the common interest of the great powers in preventing a breakdown of the global counterproliferation regime, there is much basis for diplomacy to encourage China and Russia to quietly inform Iran that they would not stand in the way of Security Council action if the current Iran-EU negotiations break down. China could remind Iran of its long-standing position that it will not block a consensus among the P-5 on issues unrelated to China. Or as Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said when asked about this at his November Tehran joint press conference with his Iranian counterpart Kamal Kharrazi, "Veto cannot be used excessively since there are special limits to that." One hopes that Director of the National Security Council's foreign policy committee Hossein Moussavian was correct when he told Kayhan newspaper his assessment of Li's visit was, "We would be mistaken if we thought China would ever stand up to the Americans and engage in an embroilment over Iran's nuclear activities."

Russia holds a particularly powerful instrument for influencing Iran. Moscow strongly supports Iran's nuclear power program. Disagreements about the 1995 contract for the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant and related facilities—initially to include enrichment facilities—were a major issue in U.S.-Russian relations all during the Clinton years, despite several U.S.-Russian agreements to limit Russian nuclear cooperation with Iran to just that one power plant. The Iranian leadership has placed great political importance on the completion of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, which—after many delays from the original completion date of 2000—is now due to be fueled and begin operations in mid- or late-2006. If Russia were to quietly inform Iran that Bushehr cannot be fueled if the talks with Europe break down, that would be a strong incentive to Tehran to reach agreement with the EU. Such a Russian position would be a logical outgrowth of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's agreement to the G-8 statement on Iran at their last summit in Sea Island, Georgia, last June.

Turning the Nuclear Fuel Question into an Opportunity

The West could provide Russia with additional reasons to reinforce the G-8 common position about Iranian nuclear

activities if it were to address Russian commercial interests about nuclear fuel. In theory, Iran's enrichment program should be a worry for Russia, in that if Iran can enrich its own fuel, it would not need to buy Russian fuel. But in fact this has not been a potent factor in Russian thinking. Iran has been prepared to commit to take Russian fuel for at least ten years—not surprising, since the Iranian enrichment program is much more suited for producing the smaller amount of highly enriched uranium (HEU) needed for nuclear weapons than the much larger amount of low enriched uranium needed for a power plant.

Instead of working for the West, the nuclear fuel issue has been a problem in persuading Russia to cooperate about Iran. Britain, France, and Germany (the E3) included in the October 2003 accord with Iran the phrase, "Once international concerns, including those of the three governments, are fully resolved, Iran could expect easier access to modern technology and supplies in a range of areas." In light of Iranian reports this meant access to nuclear technology and supplies, some Russians interpreted that to mean the E3 wanted to sell Iran nuclear fuel, thereby cutting Russia out of the market. That concern appears to have been largely addressed by European diplomacy to assure Russia that in fact the EU would support—perhaps even financially—Russian fuel sales to Iran in the context of an Iranian agreement to end, rather than just suspend, uranium enrichment and reprocessing.

Russian-Iranian negotiations of a fuel deal have been long and difficult, bogged down about the return to Russia of the spent fuel. The Iranians have insisted that since they are buying the fuel and the radioactive material in the spent fuel is valuable, they should be paid for shipping the spent fuel to Russia—a position rather at odds with the experience of most power utilities around the world, which have been prepared to pay large sums to dispose of spent fuel. Meanwhile, the West—especially the United States—has pressed to have the fuel well safeguarded (to prevent diversion, since the fuel can be quickly made into bomb-grade HEU) and the spent fuel returned quickly (since it contains readily extractable plutonium suitable for a bomb). The Iranian stance in the negotiations is not encouraging. Russian reports say the two sides are talking about returning the fuel "in about a decade due to technological reasons." If Russia is going to provide fuel—which should happen only if Iran has fully addressed concerns about its nuclear program—then return after one year would be much preferable, though expensive because the fuel would still be quite radioactive.

Iran has been sensitive to implications that its fuel supply has to be subject to special rules. But the Iran case could be used as the occasion to formulate a new global policy of enhanced safeguards about spent fuel, to be worked out before the first shipments to Bushehr in about two years. Not only could such a new universal standards address Western concerns about the proliferation risk of the fuel, but the new global safeguards could also be used to resolve an issue in which Russia has a strong commercial interest. According to Minatom, shipments of U.S.-origin spent fuel to Russia from power reactors in Europe and Asia could earn Russia a billion dollars a year in storage fees. Such shipments of U.S.-origin spent fuel to Russia have been advocated by Thomas Cochran, a physicist at the Natural Resource Defense Council, and promoted by The Nonproliferation Trust established by a group of U.S. and German companies, which has signed agreements with Minatom. Putin has endorsed the concept. While there are many technical and economic issues involved, the essential problems have been political, meaning primarily U.S. reluctance to see the spent fuel going to Russia and Washington's hopes to leverage this issue in order to stop Russia's work on Bushehr. In light of past failures, it is time to consider a more modest U.S. position, offering more significant advantages to Russia and asking for more limited cooperation about Iranian nuclear activities, specifically, no fueling of Bushehr in the absence of a EU-Iran deal.

How the United States Could be More Active

Much of the talk about a more active U.S. role at resolving the Iran nuclear issue is misguided. Any U.S. offer to engage Iran would only sideline the EU-Iran negotiations, when Europe is better placed to take the lead, given the history of distrust between the United States and Iran. Furthermore, bilateral U.S.-Iran talks would bog down in

bitter disputes, as would any attempt to reach a "grand bargain" addressing all the complaints each side has against the other.

Where Washington can play a useful role at facilitating the European-Iranian negotiations is to promote P-5 unity about Iran's nuclear program. The ideal would be to take advantage of some international venue, such as the May NPT Review Conference in New York, for the P-5 foreign ministers to declare their common concern about Iran's nuclear activities.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #936

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

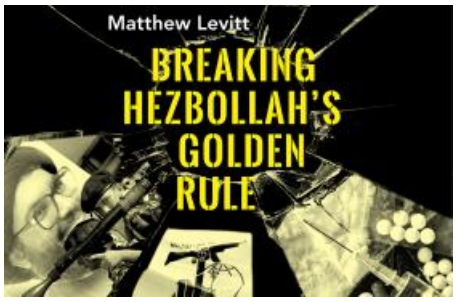
Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)