

U.S. Policy and the Iranian Nuclear Question

By Ray Takeyh
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While Washington is focused on exaggerations about Iraqi capabilities to produce nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the run-up to war, a more pressing problem confronts the United States and the international community in neighboring Iran. In the coming months, the United States will face critical decisions about confronting Tehran's bid to become a nuclear power.

Over the past year, evidence has emerged that the Islamic Republic of Iran has developed an elaborate nuclear infrastructure. Beyond the incongruity of an oil-rich state pursuing a nuclear program for power, the nature of Iran's facilities suggests that its civilian program was intended to camouflage acquisition of nuclear military capability. Moreover, the sophisticated nature of these installations reveals that Iran may be approaching a point where it will no longer require external assistance to complete its program.

Should Iran reach that threshold, traditional counter-proliferation measures such as intrusive international inspections, rigid export controls, and pressure on traditional suppliers such as Russia and Pakistan are unlikely to impact Iran's nuclear timetable. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) snap inspections to which Iran recently agreed may delay this process, but they will not impact Iran's ability to produce a bomb.

However, it is not inevitable that Iran will be the next member of the nuclear club. In the clerical corridors of power, there is in fact a debate regarding the wisdom of crossing the nuclear threshold. A more imaginative U.S. policy, focused on greater political and economic engagement with Tehran and support of pragmatist elements, can still influence the outcome of these deliberations and avert another proliferation crisis in the Middle East. That policy, as discussed below, should include:

- Loosening economic sanctions and curbs on foreign assistance to Iran;
- Rethinking our relationship with the country's reformists; and
- Promoting engagement and dialogue with Iran on issues of common concern, including post-war Iraq.

Reasons for Iran's Nuclear Aspirations

The prevailing conventional wisdom attributes Iran's nuclear motivations to its turbulent and unpredictable neighborhood – and instability in Central Asia and Afghanistan are serious ongoing concerns for Iran's leadership. However, Tehran's nuclear aspirations are driven by a narrower and more fundamental set of threats. After all, it is yet to be demonstrated how nuclear weapons can prevent political instability in Afghanistan or ethnic conflict in the former Soviet Republics from spreading to Iran. In reality, since the inception of the theocracy, the task of creating a viable deterrent against Saddam's Iraq and the American colossus has been the prime factor driving Iran's program to develop weapons of mass destruction.

The demise of the Baathist regime in Iraq, which had employed chemical weapons against Iran in the 1980's, has removed an existential threat for Tehran. But while one menacing actor has faded from the scene, the specter of the American threat – personified by 130,000 U.S. troops across the border – has intensified. The Bush Administration's shrill "axis of evil" rhetoric of regime change and its provocative doctrine of preemption have only enhanced the deterrent value of the "strategic weapon" to the embattled Iranian leadership. As Jomhuri-ye Eslami, a leading Iranian newspaper associated with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stressed in November, "In the contemporary world, it is obvious that having access to advanced weapons shall cause deterrence and therefore security, and it will neutralize the evil wish of arrogant powers to attack other nations and countries."

Despite the enhanced deterrent value of the nuclear option, it is too early to suggest that the theocracy has made its decision and is relentlessly pursuing a determined nuclear strategy. While there exists a consensus within the clerical state on the need for a robust nuclear research program, no such unanimity exists around the question of actually crossing the nuclear threshold. As Gholamreza Aghazadeh, President Muhammad Khatami's chief advisor on nuclear issues was quoted by *Le Monde* as saying, "Peace and stability cannot be achieved by means of nuclear weapons." Iran's future course of action in this respect will depend on the nature of its relationship with the United States and the evolving security architecture of the post-war Persian Gulf.

The Debate Within Iran

The most vocal advocates of continued compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) are to be found among Iran's reformist faction, which has assumed some decision making authority since the 1997 election of Khatami to the presidency. While the reformists' decision to withdraw from upcoming parliamentary elections has introduced new discord into the internal political situation, their arguments will remain on the table.

Reformist politicians argue that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will only accentuate the country's strategic vulnerabilities, as such a step would lead the Gulf sheikhdoms to further consolidate their ties to the United States and isolate Iran in its immediate neighborhood. As Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani has stressed, "The existence of the nuclear weapons will turn us into a threat that could be exploited in a dangerous way to harm our relations with the countries of the region."

The reformers also argue that denouncing Iran's long-standing treaty obligations under the NPT could lead to imposition of debilitating multilateral sanctions, further weakening Iran's stagnant economy. At a time when Iran requires approximately \$17 billion in foreign investment to rejuvenate its economy, it cannot stand further international economic pressure. The reformers remain reluctant, however, to dispense altogether with the nuclear program and prefer to maintain a robust research program as a means of keeping all options open in the face of the Bush Administration's unpredictability and inflammatory rhetoric.

For Iranian hardliners, the strategic argument is simple and compelling: only a nuclear arsenal will provide Iran with the strategic leverage it needs. Far from being

deterred by the prospect of international sanctions and isolation, the hardliners view a confrontation with the international community and its American guardian as an opportunity to cast themselves as defenders of Iran's sovereignty and to deflect attention from the domestic deficiencies of Islamic rule.

True to form, they used the latest crisis – which culminated with Tehran's accession to the NPT's Additional Protocol in December 2003 – to mobilize public opinion and castigate the reformers as accomplices of imperialism. They branded support for accommodation with the IAEA as evidence of a lack of nationalism and revolutionary commitment. The reactionary head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, proclaimed, "If the West wants to get tough with Iran, then we will leave the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As far as we are concerned there is nothing wrong with that." The equally militant head of the Council of Guardians, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, similarly mused, "What is wrong with considering this treaty on nuclear energy and pulling out of it? North Korea withdrew."

In an ironic twist, the Bush Administration's belligerence toward Iran has played into the hands of this hard-line faction most inclined toward a nuclear breakout. In failing to put forth a subtle or creative approach to Iran's Islamic leaders, the Administration has, in effect, silenced its own voice on stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The greatest missed opportunity lies in the Administration's failure in this most recent crisis to take advantage of the defection to the reformist line of a segment of the conservative coalition. Despite its simplistic depictions in the Western media, the conservative bloc features both hardliners and pragmatic elements. The pragmatic conservatives gravitate around the influential former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, occupying key positions in the national security infrastructure and in critical institutions such as the Expediency Council, which is responsible for mediating conflicts between Iran's contending political actors.

It was under the steady hand of Hassan Rowhani, the Secretary to the National Security Council and a Rafsanjani ally, that Iran accepted the mandates of the Additional Protocol and intrusive inspection measures. Faced with the prospect of multilateral sanctions and disruptions to Iran's important political and commercial ties to Europe, the pragmatic conservatives joined with the reformers in pressing the Supreme Leader Khamenei to accommodate the demands of the international community.

The pragmatic conservatives' actions reflected their historical focus on rejuvenating the Iranian economy. They claim, convincingly to many elements of the political spectrum, that only through provision of jobs for beleaguered youth and opportunities for the hard-pressed middle class can the Islamic Republic avert a social implosion. The economic dimension of the decision to endorse the Additional Protocol was all too evident, as the centrist Entekhab newspaper (identified with the pragmatic conservatives) stressed, "Accepting additional protocols will create some problems for us, but not doing so is not without consequences either."

While Iran's endorsement of the Additional Protocol may have defused the immediate crisis, this important step forward has not extinguished the country's nuclear ambitions. Under the auspices of the IAEA, Iran can still enrich uranium, construct its heavy water plants for conversion of plutonium, and complete an indigenous fuel cycle. In essence, Iran can establish an elaborate nuclear infrastructure that could be potentially adapted for military purposes. The agreement also created divisions between the

European Union (EU) and the United States, as it is doubtful that America's allies will further pressure Iran. Given the present absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, it is unlikely that the international community will embark on a confrontational policy toward another Middle East state based on the pledges of Washington.

What Should Washington Do?

Given the centrality of the United States in Iran's strategic view of the world, a better relationship with Washington can be the best means of ensuring the theocracy's continued compliance with its non-proliferation pledges. A greater degree of engagement and dialogue between Washington and Tehran over issues of common concern, such as the stabilization of Iraq and the postwar Persian Gulf, can empower the nascent coalition of reformers and pragmatists who seek to eschew the provocative nuclear option. Moreover, the Bush Administration, which has discounted reformers in Iran, should reconsider its perspective. Although the reformers have not been able to usher in a democratic polity – and are threatening to boycott the next round of parliamentary elections as a means of pressing for change – they have been effective in restraining the hardliners' impetuous impulses. Iranian acceptance of the Additional Protocol reflects the influence of this faction on foreign policy issues.

Finally, given the importance of economic considerations in Iran's calculations, a greater degree of economic engagement between Tehran and Washington could lead to further Iranian restraint. Iran's acceptance of the IAEA measures reveals that its militancy is counter-balanced by a range of other factors, particularly commercial relations. The EU's threat to suspend its trade negotiations with Iran was an instrumental factor in pressing Iran in the right direction. By lessening its economic sanctions and granting Iran access to international financial institutions such as the IMF, Washington can provide itself with important leverage in impacting Iran's nuclear designs. By tempering its rhetoric and pursuing a clever policy of engagement, the United States can best dissuade Iran from its nuclear course.

Ray Takeyh is a professor of national security studies and director of studies of the Near East and South Asia Center at the National Defense University.