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Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran: A Skeptic's View

By Justin Logan

This article examines recent developments in the diplomatic efforts to prevent Tehran's nuclear progress and situates such efforts in the context of U.S. grand strategy. While the Obama administration's decision to participate in the P5+1 negotiations is the correct policy choice, there is a better than even chance that such efforts will fail to prevent an incipient Iranian nuclear capability.

The United Nations, in response to reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), placed relatively toothless sanctions on Iran in 2006, 2007, and 2008, for refusing to halt uranium enrichment. During the protests that followed Iran's June 12 presidential election, international pressure on Iran increased. In September 2009, Iran revealed to the IAEA that it was constructing a second enrichment facility near Qom. Following international outcry over this revelation, Iran agreed to talks with the P5+1 powers (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany), which were held in Geneva in early October. Those talks produced an agreement in principle that Iran would ship its low enriched uranium (LEU) overseas for further enrichment and would submit to IAEA inspections at its Qom facility.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress is contemplating additional unilateral sanctions. The centerpiece of this effort is a plan to impose further restrictions on Iran's oil and gas industries and prohibit the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran. Questions remain whether enforcing such a law would constitute an embargo, an act of war under international law. At this time of writing, a second round of negotiations is ongoing, and a deal to ship LEU out of Iran appears imminent, but the broader issues surrounding Iran's nuclear activities remain unsettled.

There are two major reasons to doubt that the P5+1 efforts will succeed in preventing Iranian progress toward a nuclear capability. First, Washington and foreign capitals view the implications of Iran's program differently, which limits other

countries' willingness to impose costly sanctions on Tehran. Second, Iran likely cannot be persuaded that a nuclear capacity is not in their security interests.

The main source of the disconnect between foreign capitals and Washington is not an American fear that Tehran may one day engage in a suicidal nuclear strike against Israel or another country. Rather, many U.S. strategists fear that Iran's possession of a nuclear capability would limit American military options in the Middle East. In particular they fear that a nuclear Iran would be capable of deterring military action by the United States. As the political scientist Kenneth Waltz wrote in 1995, "a big reason for America's resistance to the spread of nuclear weapons is that if weak countries have some they will cramp our style."

Since America's "style" in the Middle East has differed radically from that of our allies, increased Iranian deterrent capabilities carry greater implications for Washington. If the United States were to rein in its grand strategy, however, it could bring its concerns about proliferation more neatly into line with its allies, enhancing the prospects for progress—and burden sharing—within multilateral efforts. The prevailing idea that nuclear proliferation holds more danger—and as a result is worth more to prevent—for the United States than for its allies speaks volumes about the grandiosity of post-Cold War U.S. grand strategy.

The Obama administration's desire to prevent Iranian acquisition of a nuclear break-out option is prudent, and its attempt to prevent such an outcome through multilateral negotiations in the context of the P5+1 meetings is wise. Still, there is a second reason to doubt that this approach will prevent Iranian progress: the central and unfortunate reality is that a greater nuclear capability would likely improve Iranian security. At times, American analysts appear incapable of empathizing with Iran on this score, so it may be worth a brief examination.

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is dedicated to promoting peaceful resolutions to the nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran. It aims to provide policy makers with analysis on the latest developments in both nations and options for formulating coherent U.S. responses. In highlighting the importance of achieving diplomatic solutions, the goal is to avoid armed conflict and its attendant consequences.

HARRISON MOAR

*Managing Editor;
hmoar@cato.org*

CONTRIBUTORS:

DOUG BADOW

Senior Fellow

TED GALEN CARPENTER

*VP for Defense and Foreign
Policy Studies*

JUSTIN LOGAN

*Associate Director of Foreign
Policy Studies*

CHRISTOPHER A. PREBLE

Director of Foreign Policy Studies

The United States is the world's only great power, insulated from grave threats by two oceans and two weak, friendly neighbors. It spends nearly as much on its military as the rest of the world combined and faces no peer competitor on the horizon or even over the horizon. Even so, the U.S. foreign policy community regularly frets about such relatively trivial security issues as Somali pirates, Chinese energy contracts in Africa, and Russia's defeat of Georgia.

How would the same individuals view things if they were sitting in Tehran? The United States spends roughly 100 times as much on defense as does Iran. Its economy is close to 50 times the size of Iran's. The United States militarily controls the countries on Iran's eastern and western borders and regularly patrols the Persian Gulf that constitutes Iran's southern border. Washington maintains extensive unilateral sanctions against Iran and the U.S. Congress may pass legislation that could provide for a naval blockade. All of this is in addition

to U.S.-led multilateral efforts to pressure Iran into compliance. This sketch is presented simply to examine what the view must look like from Tehran, something that happens too infrequently in policy discussions in Washington.

Given the material disparities between Iran and the United States, the acrimonious relationship between Tehran and Washington, and the potentially disastrous consequences of a U.S.-Iran war, there is every reason to attempt to assuage Iran's security concerns and change its calculus that a nuclear capability would improve its security. Similarly, Washington should attempt to convince other countries that a nuclear Iran is worth preventing. In preparing for possible diplomatic failure, however, Washington should keep in mind the larger imperative of not creating incentives for other countries like Iran to pursue nuclear technology. Adopting a restrained grand strategy would be the best way of accomplishing that goal. ■

Venezuela: A Proliferation Cloud in the Western Hemisphere

By Ted Galen Carpenter

While the international community focuses on the danger of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and Northeast Asia, Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez is creating a similar specter in the Western Hemisphere. Chavez has recently indicated an intention to commence a nuclear program. There are signs that he hopes—and perhaps assumes—that Russia will aid the development of a Venezuelan nuclear program as it aided Iran's program. Given the increasingly cozy relationship between Moscow and Caracas, which has included more than \$4 billion in arms sales, that may not be an unrealistic expectation.

Because of Chavez's track record, Venezuela's neighbors understandably view with some skepticism his assurances that a nuclear program would be solely for peaceful purposes. Relations between Venezuela and neighboring Colombia have deteriorated markedly in recent years, and tensions along their border

have flared on several occasions. Most, although not all, of the provocations have come from the Venezuelan side.

Chavez has asserted that the arms purchases from Russia are needed to dissuade the United States from contemplating forcible regime change. He would likely use a similar rationale to justify a weaponized nuclear program. The Obama administration should move to discredit such an argument. Washington should give assurances that if Chavez does not pursue the development of nuclear weapons and refrains from actions that threaten Colombia or other states in the hemisphere, the United States will not seek to undermine his regime. As a tangible reassurance, Washington ought to rescind plans to establish seven military bases in Colombia (ostensibly for counternarcotics missions), a step that has generated fierce criticism from governments throughout South America. Chavez

argues that their actual purpose is to intimidate Venezuela—or worse, to serve as staging areas for an attack.

Chavez is an odious, authoritarian ruler, but his abuses inside Venezuela are up to the Venezuelan people to deal with. They do not pose a threat to important U.S. security interests. The possibility of a nuclear arms race in the Western Hemisphere, though, is another matter entirely. Such a development would menace the stability of the region and undermine Latin America's status as a nuclear-weapons-free zone. That prospect is very much a matter of legitimate concern to the United States. Washington should convey a blunt message to Caracas that it is playing a dangerous game. And Moscow needs to be told that good relations between Russia and the United States will depend significantly on the Kremlin's restraint regarding arms sales—and avoidance of nuclear assistance—to Venezuela. ■