Curbing Nuclear Proliferation: An Interview with Mohamed ElBaradei

ACT: Obviously, it looks like there’s been some good news this morning coming out of Tehran. I just wanted to get your reaction to Iran’s announcement that it will allow IAEA inspections and suspend its uranium-enrichment activities.

ElBaradei: Yes, it’s encouraging news...[but] I still need to be briefed on Iran’s exact commitment. However, this is in line with their commitment to me last week that they are ready to come with a full declaration of all their past nuclear activities and they are ready to conclude a protocol to regulate their future nuclear activities.

And if the news today is correct that they are also ready to suspend, or apply a moratorium on, their enrichment activities as a confidence-building measure, as called [for] by the [the IAEA Board of Governors] in their decision last month, then I think this will open the way for hopefully a comprehensive settlement of the Iranian issues through verification and through political dialogue.

ACT: If this does play out in term of the details that you are hearing, would this address the fundamental concerns that the international community has about Iran’s nuclear programs?

ElBaradei: Well, I think we still have to verify whatever declaration we will get and make sure that it is comprehensive and accurate. So, that would take care of the past activities. We then also need to have the protocol and make sure that all future activities in Iran would be under our verification. As you know, we never have 100 percent certainty. That’s why we would like to have in Iran and everywhere else a continuous process of inspections, and we need the authority of the protocol to enable us in a country with an extensive knowledge and program to do a comprehensive job.

So yes, if we get a comprehensive declaration and we are able to verify that it is accurate and complete, and if we get the protocol and we are able to implement the protocol in all future activities in Iran, then I think this would be a leap forward in terms of the international community’s concerns about Iran’s nuclear program.

ACT: Have you discussed the latest talks at all with the [European] foreign ministers?

ElBaradei: I think I am going to have that...either tonight or tomorrow.

Export Controls for Nuclear Weapons Technology

ACT: Switching to another subject, we just read your very interesting article in the [October 16] Economist. You mention that the “sheer diversity of [nuclear] technology has made it harder to control both procurement and sales” of that technology. What steps would you suggest to alleviate this problem?
ElBaradei: You mean in terms of export control or overall?

ACT: Export control or any other steps we can take to deal with this diversity of technology that you mention.

ElBaradei: I think export control is obviously something where we need to continue to tighten the screws. It is becoming more and more difficult; a lot of these items are dual-use, but I think that one possibility is to obviously link arms export controls to the conclusion and implementation of additional protocols. I think it would be particularly good to see an item that could be used toward a nuclear activity that could only go to a country where the [IAEA] applied a comprehensive and in-depth verification through additional protocols. But export control is just one aspect of the problem and, as you saw in the recent Economist, there are lots of things that we need to do, concurrently if you like, because they reinforce each other.

ACT: Can you elaborate a little more on those? What sort of sequence do you envision, and what are the possibilities—political possibilities—of implementing those steps as well as the other suggestions that you made?

ElBaradei: Well, I think that the first thing, which is probably the easiest, is to make sure that countries that are parties of the NPT (nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty) have safeguard agreements and additional protocols enforced. I think the second step is to make sure that the export control regime is more inclusive, more transparent. The reporting requirements, for example, are shared. For the international community to be vigilant, for efforts to import items for weapons. Again, as I suggested, we need to look into whether the sensitive parts of the fuel cycle need to be multilateralized, such as enrichment and reprocessing activities. In other words, keep national control from weapons usable material as far away as we can. I think that is a very important measure in the regime. To remove HEU (highly enriched uranium) or limit very much HEU and plutonium from the fuel cycle, and if it were to be used, again, it would be under multilateral control.

That will be a major step forward. That will take time, and we need to think about how to move in that direction. Then, obviously we need to continue—and that was not in my Economist piece—we need to continue to work on drivers or incentives for why countries work to acquire nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction. These are your standard reasons: instability, insecurity, festering disputes, deteriorating economic and social conditions in many parts of the world.

And again, obviously continue to work to delegitimize nuclear weapons. We continue to have nuclear weapons relied on as a weapon of choice. If that policy were to continue, we continue to have countries who are in a security bind, if you like, or perceive themselves to be in security bind to look for acquisition of nuclear weapons. So, we need to delegitimize the nuclear weapon, and by delegitimizing...meaning trying to develop a different system of security that does not depend on nuclear deterrence. But also, we need at the same time to provide some system of inclusive security where countries do not feel that their security is threatened and they need to provide themselves a deterrent like the big boys. These are issues that we need to look at; they all reinforce each other. There is a relationship between all these measures.

I firmly believe that in the long run you cannot just continue to have the privileged few relying on either nuclear weapons or the nuclear weapons umbrella and others are told, “You cannot have nuclear weapons,” because again we continue to have these failures. We continue to act as simply fire brigades, trying to put a fire out somewhere, and then we discover there is a fire erupting somewhere else. We need to change the whole nonproliferation security environment and with that also have a much more inclusive, comprehensive nonproliferation regime.

Changing the Nonproliferation Regime
ACT: You’re calling for some significant changes. I guess you don’t think that the nonproliferation regime is doing that very well right now. Is that fair to say? Would you characterize things that way?

ElBaradei: I think it is fair to say that it is under a great deal of stress, and if I am asking for significant changes, it is because the world is going through significant changes. A few years back, the terrorist phenomenon was not the major phenomenon we had to face. Efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction were not with the intensity we see in the last few years. The security threats are changing, and with it our response needs to change.

ACT: Now, the steps you called for—are these things the IAEA can implement on its own, or does this need political action by the member states?

ElBaradei: Well, I think we need...first of all, we need the realization by member states that the system we have right now is inadequate and needs to be improved. Once you have that, you know, sinking in, that feeling that you need to change the system, then I think we can move forward. Some of these measures, of course, we can do within the confines on the IAEA. That's basically the question of more comprehensive safeguards, more intrusive verifications, possibly multilateralizing the sensitive aspects of the fuel cycle.

Other parts, of course, have to be dealt with somewhere else, primarily in the United Nations—developing a better system of collective security or energizing the system of collective security, trying to intervene early in situations of threats of weapons of mass destruction or massive violation of human rights. So, it’s between the agency, between the United Nations, between some of the regional organizations like the European Union, NATO. Everybody has to chip in, I think, and see how we can have a functioning system of collective security where we do not continue to face the threat of countries trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction or particularly nuclear weapons. Right now what we have is countries [having nuclear weapons] because of historical incidents. They developed them in the ’50s and ’60s or...that again, that was not meant to be the norm in the future. It was suppose to be a temporary situation. We need to bite the bullet and see how we can move beyond nuclear weapons deterrence, and I think that we have not done that yet.

ACT: Many critics argue that one weakness currently in the nonproliferation regime is that it allows states-parties to withdraw after acquiring the equipment necessary to develop fissile material. Do you have any recommendations for overcoming this problem?

ElBaradei: Well I think, again, the whole system needs to be linked to security. I mean, it is not...we should not and I see undue reliance on saying that countries are in the system and they need to comply. That’s correct. But we also need two things. The system needs to continue to serve their security needs. You cannot expect them to continue to participate as a part of the system if their security is not being served. And the fact that they can withdraw from the treaty...I mean, that’s true, but that doesn’t mean that’s the end of the road.

If you look, I think, in 1992, there was a Security Council meeting at the summit where they had heads of states and government. At that meeting, I think they issued a declaration saying that the proliferation of nuclear weapons—I think weapons of mass destruction—is a threat to international peace and security. What does that mean? That even if a country were to move out of the regime, and there are indications that they are developing weapons, the Security Council is going to come back after them. So yes, countries have a right to opt out of the regime if their supreme national interest, or what have you, is threatened, but that does not mean that the Security Council cannot come back after them—not because they walked out of the regime but because their situation is a threat to international peace and security.

If you want a treaty whereby there is no withdrawal whatsoever, you then have to have a universal treaty. That’s what I am really arguing at the end of the day—that you have a regime which prohibits nuclear weapons, which is universally applied and which is regarded as a peremptory norm of international law, which means that whether you are in or out, you are bound by that regime. But we
are still a long way from that because the regime that we have now is not universal: you have countries outside the regime, and even inside the regime are countries, that continue to have nuclear weapons. So under the present regime, countries need to keep this opting-out clause because they might be in a position or their security, as they say, might be threatened by a state, and they need to opt out.

It is clearly a weakness. But we need to deal with [that] short term by saying to those who want to walk out that walking out is not clearly justified or that the Security Council can in fact examine the situation and might come to a different conclusion. And in the long term, let's work for a universal regime where it is applied and there is no opting out.

Limiting Access to Nuclear Technology

**ACT:** I had a question about Article IV of the NPT, which was a chief incentive for countries to join the NPT and which provided for the sharing of peaceful nuclear technology. Given the concerns raised about the spread of dual-use nuclear technology, do you think that there is anything that can be done to provide countries with other incentives to belong to the nonproliferation regime? And if so, what would they be?

**ElBaradei:** To provide other incentives, you mean...

**ACT:** Yes, because Article IV is supposed to be an incentive, but it's caused a lot of concern about dual use [for both civilian and military applications] of technologies.

**ElBaradei:** Well, first of all, we now have everybody with the exception of India, Pakistan, and Israel, and I don't think these three countries are going to join by simply providing them an incentive, in terms of technology. They already themselves have the technology, in many ways, indigenously developed.

But on Article IV, I don't think Article IV is a problem. I think the problem under the NPT is that you can have the full gamut of fuel-cycle technologies, and that really is the problem. The concern is not that a country has a power reactor or a research reactor. The concern is that the country might have a reprocessing capability or an enrichment capability, which would enable it to develop nuclear weapon-usable material. And I think in the future one can think of having, in my view, possibly an additional protocol to the NPT, whereby you limit the right of—the individual right of—countries to have certain parts of the fuel cycle.

Again, I come back to the multilateralization of the fuel cycle. So, you can say “Article IV is applicable, we will give you the technology to use it for health, agriculture, medicine, radiotherapy, cancer treatment, water, you can have it for research reactors, you can have a power reactor. But if you need enriched uranium or you need to reprocess plutonium, that should not be under national control, it should be under international control or the very least some sort of multilateral process.” You would continue to provide the technology, you would continue to give countries access to the technology, but you would restrict the parts of the fuel cycle that create the most concern, and these are, in my view, the reprocessing and enrichment and also, possibly, a final repository where you have spent fuel with plutonium in it.

Realizing Article VI Disarmament Commitments

**ACT:** Getting back to the question of nuclear weapons states and delegitimizing nuclear weapons, what do you think would be some of the most important near-term steps that nuclear weapons states could take toward meeting their Article VI disarmament obligations?

**ElBaradei:** I think, to start, they need to have a major reduction in their existing arsenals. I read we
still have something near 30,000 warheads in existence. That’s absolutely unjustifiable by any scenario of nuclear deterrence. We can still have, I think, the nuclear weapon states can have major, major cuts in their nuclear arsenals to show their commitment toward—to show that they are serious in implementing their commitment under Article VI. We still have the CTBT (Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty), which has always been regarded as a key to the implementation of Article VI, unratified. We still have the FMCT (Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty), which would put a cap on fissile materials for weapons. We are not even able to agree on a method to negotiate for the last 10 years.

So, these are to me three clear indicators of the seriousness of the weapon states on moving forward implementing Article VI. Even the CTBT is not really the panacea because, as we know now, we can do a lot of testing through computer simulation and subcritical testing.

So, at the very minimum, at least we have a ban on nuclear testing, we have a ban on producing yet again additional material for weapons, and [we] try to move energetically on getting rid of many of the stockpiles that are still in existence; even if they are not operational, we still need to dispose of all the warheads. When we come to a situation where we have hundreds instead of the thousands we have, then we need obviously to take the second step, and that’s what sort of alternative security regime we will have if we are to dispose completely of nuclear weapons.

But we are not even there yet because we are still far away from reaching this low threshold, which would force us at that time to think of the alternative system, although in my view we need to start thinking today of what kind of world we can have if we do not have nuclear weapons and how we can assure our security. We definitely need a reliable system of security, but a system that does not rely on nuclear weapons, and possibly more of an inclusive system that does not rely on unilateral or preemptive use of force but rooted primarily in the collective security system which we have under the UN Charter. If you have a collective system of security, then you need to develop. Again, the system you have now is almost dormant. You need to deal with the new threats. How do you deal with the possible cheats, even if you ban nuclear weapons? How do you deal with imminent threats of massive abuse of human rights, genocide? You need to have a collective system but also a collective system that is not paralyzed by veto or by [lack of] consensus—a collective system that is dynamic, that even in certain situations has to be preemptive. Given some of the risks right now, we cannot just wait until things happen. You need to take the initiative, and you need to be preemptive. But you need to be preemptive within a collective system and based on an international legitimacy.

**ACT:** Do you think the nuclear weapons states’ stance on their Article VI commitments has influenced other countries’ decisions maybe to lag in concluding additional protocols to their safeguards agreements?

**ElBaradei:** Yeah, I think some of the countries have been, frankly, grumbling that no progress on nuclear disarmament has made them rethink their obligations, the urgency of them concluding additional protocols. I heard that argument made here in the [IAEA] by a number of large and small non-nuclear weapons states: Why should we rush into an additional protocol if the weapon states are not energetically pursuing [the] Article VI process?

**India, Israel, Pakistan**

**ACT:** Turning to the outliers of the NPT—India, Israel, and Pakistan—they’ve obviously been a persistent concern for nonproliferation advocates. Do you think the NPT can survive without these countries’ membership, and if they choose to stay outside the treaty, is there any progress that can be made short of getting them to sign up?

**ElBaradei:** I think the NPT can survive—has survived—without them. But I think, ultimately, that the nonproliferation regime will not survive without them. The NPT is a part of the regime, and if we talk about the regime—global, universal, enduring—then it will not survive without the three. Until we
manage to bring them into the regime, I think we need to continue to start a dialogue with them. I for one believe that, rather than just trying to continue treating them as pariahs, we need to try and see how we can engage them as partners in an arms control process, maybe not necessarily under or within the framework of the NPT but within the framework of a larger arms control process.

As you probably know, they were supposed to be a part of the FMCT, they were supposed to be a part of the CTBT, [but] they haven’t yet joined either of these. None of them have ratified the CTBT, and we don’t yet have serious negotiations regarding the FMCT. I think we need to engage. I think the policy, right now in my view, the wise policy would be to engage these three countries and not just to continue to treat them as an outsider because, in the long run, we need to get everybody on board. And if we haven’t succeeded to get them through the NPT, we need to think of other ways to get them on board.

North Korea

ACT: Turning to the question of North Korea, in the event that a settlement to this crisis is reached, what do you think needs to be done to verify a freeze or a dismantlement of the nuclear facilities, in terms of technical tools or a political agreement?

ElBaradei: Well, again we do not know what exactly they have right now. We need to go back in the country and do a proper verification. And I think we need at a minimum an additional protocol with the safeguards agreement and possibly some additional rights to ensure that we have a powerful system to detect every aspect of the nuclear program. I think we clearly need all the intelligence information that we can get. We need satellite imagery, which we now use almost as a routine. We need environmental sampling.

I think, with the new technology, the verification system is becoming much more powerful than, say, a decade ago. But we need the authority to apply that system, which means right of access, right of no-notice of inspection, right of getting all the information we need. So, I would say, at the minimum, I think we would need the additional protocol and possibly again, if we go back and discover that we need some additional authority, then we need to make North Korea understand that they should be as transparent as possible.

Again, if I can revert back to Iran for a second, I made the statement in the last couple of months that, you know, sometimes if you have a complex nuclear program that has not been subject to verification and you need to create credible assurance, you cannot just stick to the legal requirements of a safeguard agreement or protocol, but what you are really looking for is absolute comprehensive transparency by the country. If the country is cooperating, if they are claiming they have nothing to hide, they have every interest to work closely with us.

So, the short answer is yes, we need as much authority that we have—at the minimum, additional protocols—but expect that we might ask for an additional measures of transparency by North Korea if we are not able to resolve certain issues through simply [an] additional protocol or safeguard agreement.

ACT: Is there anything you can say about North Korea’s uranium-enrichment program?

ElBaradei: Not really. You hear that they confess to having an enrichment program, you hear again that they have denied that they have an enrichment program. So, the only way to really get the facts is to go back and do verification. At this stage, I am not able to say with any degree of confidence whether they do or do not have a uranium-enrichment program.
ACT: Technically, as you know, it is much more difficult to verify a uranium-enrichment program. How confident are you that, if you did have access there, you would be able to verify whether or not they had a uranium-enrichment program?

ElBaradei: It’s not easy because, as you said, uranium enrichment could be a very small facility and you cannot detect it through environmental sampling. But we will have to continue to rely on information, intelligence information, satellite monitoring, environmental sampling. But also I think the key to any verification process is to continue doing that. We will never, even after a year or two, be able to say, “We have 100 percent certainty.” We don’t have 100 percent certainty anywhere, and therefore the solution is to be there all the time, and I think North Korea will not be an exception. We will reach a point when we say, “Yes, we believe that we have no indication they have anything undeclared.” But that’s not sufficient. We need to continue to be there all the time, and as I said, if they are cooperative, cooperating with us, if they are showing transparency, then we have a higher degree of certainty, but in all situations, we need to be there all the time. Can I give 100 percent assurance? No, I can’t, in Korea or anywhere else. The answer is that I am there all the time to be able to catch anything which we have not detected previously, and if a country were to be detected in noncompliance, then obviously...then the international community has to react and they have to react strongly to any breach or any violation.

Mohamed ElBaradei, director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), shared his perspective on a number of nonproliferation issues during an October 21 interview with Arms Control Today editor Miles Pomper and ACA research analyst Paul Kerr.

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