

Solving the Iranian Nuclear Puzzle

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Three years after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran had secretly built uranium-enrichment facilities, diplomatic opportunities to resolve concerns about Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions are narrowing fast.

To improve the chances for success, U.S. and European leaders must pursue a more comprehensive diplomatic strategy. They must further reduce Iran's incentives to enrich uranium and motives to acquire the bomb. They also need to strengthen the IAEA's authority while maintaining broad international support for greater Iranian restraint and compliance with its nonproliferation obligations.

In August 2005, Iran rejected inducements by the European Union to suspend its enrichment program and restarted enrichment-related work. That gave IAEA member states little choice but to find Iran in noncompliance with its safeguards agreements in September and to report Iran's file to the UN Security Council last month.

Despite the 27-3 IAEA Board of Governors vote, Iran's leaders seem more determined than ever to proceed with uranium enrichment, which they say is solely for nuclear reactor fuel production but which can also create bomb-grade fissile material. In recent days, Tehran ended its voluntary cooperation with enhanced IAEA inspections and restarted small-scale enrichment experiments in defiance of IAEA member-state requests not to do so.

In response, the United States and the EU, along with Russia and possibly China, are expected to pursue a strategy in the Security Council of targeted political and economic sanctions. By itself, this will not likely induce Iran to suddenly reverse course, let alone stick with a decision to suspend uranium enrichment.

It offers little gain and high costs, but the pursuit of nuclear technology has become a popular rallying cry for Iran's controversial president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran's leaders are betting they can avoid meaningful penalties or, as India and Pakistan did, wait for international support for nonproliferation-related sanctions to erode.

Although there is no direct evidence of an illegal nuclear weapons program today, neither has the IAEA been able to determine that Iran's nuclear program is solely for peaceful purposes. Iran requires several more years to master the operation of centrifuge cascades and construct a large-scale plant that can produce highly enriched uranium for bombs. It would also take time to develop a bomb capable of delivery on a missile. But if Iran can master enrichment on research scale, Iran could pursue a clandestine nuclear weapons program, especially in the absence of intrusive inspections.

To avoid such an outcome, several steps must now be pursued and others avoided. The EU and Russia should redouble their efforts to provide Iran with a face-saving option to continue uranium-enrichment research and get a guaranteed supply of nuclear fuel through the managed use of Russian facilities. This approach would not require Iran to disavow its "right" as a member of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to "peaceful" nuclear pursuits.

At the same time, the international community must demonstrate it will respond to Iran's defiance by strengthening the IAEA's authority in Iran and elsewhere. The Security Council could adopt a

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resolution stipulating that if a state is in noncompliance with its safeguards agreement, the agency's verification authority will automatically expand until questions about possible nuclear weapons activity are resolved. The council could also require a noncompliant state to accept permanent, facility-specific IAEA safeguards. This would legally preclude the state from using equipment, facilities, and nuclear material for weapons purposes if it decides to withdraw from the NPT.

Such measures would not only strengthen the NPT but would ensure that IAEA inspections and reports, rather than potentially politically biased national intelligence assessments, serve as the basis for compliance actions. They would also provide noncompliant states a way to demonstrate they have taken corrective steps and help deter states from frivolously withdrawing from the NPT in the future.

Other tactics, such as punitive economic sanctions against a major oil exporter such as Iran, could divide and immobilize the Security Council or else provoke Iranian countermoves and even lead Iran to withdraw from the NPT. Washington-funded "regime change" initiatives will only harden Iranian resistance. The effect of a pre-emptive strike by Israel or the United States on Iran's nuclear complex would be temporary, provide a rationale for Iran openly to pursue nuclear weapons, and could trigger a regional war involving exchanges of ballistic missiles.

Rather than rushing toward confrontation with an uncertain outcome, the Bush administration must overcome its historic antipathy toward meaningful engagement with Iran. The people of Iran need to see that nuclear restraint and compliance will put Iran on a path toward peace and prosperity. Too much is at stake not to offer a better U.S.-Iranian political relationship, including a mutual nonaggression pledge, which is essential to changing Iranian perceptions that it should retain a nuclear weapons option.

There is no quick fix. Renewed and more creative diplomacy remains the only practical way to resolve the Iranian nuclear puzzle.

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