Briefing - Iran's Nuclear Program: Status and Prospects

Events

An Arms Control Association Press Briefing

Monday, September 19, 2011
National Press Club, Holeman Lounge
2:30 to 4:00

Featuring:

**Former Congressman and Admiral Joe Sestak**

**Mark Fitzpatrick,** Director of the Nonproliferation and Disarmament Program at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (London)

**Greg Thielmann,** Arms Control Association Senior Fellow

Moderated by **Daryl Kimball**, Arms Control Association Executive Director

As the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) considers its quarterly report on Iran’s nuclear program and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad prepares to address the UN General Assembly, the Arms Control Association invites you to join an expert panel discussion addressing important questions including:

- How far has Iran's nuclear program progressed and what steps would it still need to take to produce a weapon?
- What can we tell about Iranian nuclear decision-making and the factors that influence it?
- What are the risks of pursuing the “military option” and what do they mean for U.S. policy to address Iran?

Video of the event can be found on [LinkTV](#) as part of their "Bridge to Iran" series.

*Transcript by*

*Federal News Service*

*Washington, D.C.*

DARYL KIMBALL: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the National Press Club and today’s briefing on Iran’s nuclear program, status and prospects. I’m Daryl Kimball, an executive director of the Arms Control Association, which is an independent nonpartisan research and education organization focused on reducing the threats posed by the world’s most dangerous weapons.

We meet today at a very critical juncture in the long-running effort to ensure that Iran meets its international nonproliferation and safeguards obligation and to ensure that its nuclear activities are not used for weapons purposes. Since the IAEA referred the Iranian nuclear file to the U.N. Security Council, Iran has slowly but steadily increased its uranium enrichment capability.
The latest agency report on the Iranian program suggests that Iran still faces problems developing new and more efficient centrifuges and is having difficulty getting sufficient materials to build them in large numbers.

As you’ll hear today, the conclusion of many independent experts and the U.S. intelligence community is that an Iranian nuclear arsenal is neither imminent nor inevitable. Targeted multilateral sanctions put in place in the last couple of years have clearly had an effect in slowing Iran’s nuclear program.

But sanctions alone will not lead Iran to completely halt its nuclear program or become more cooperative with the IAEA. The IAEA’s Director General Amano recently stated that he is increasingly concerned about Iran’s past and current undisclosed nuclear-related activities with possible military dimensions. And all of us here speaking today share that concern.

The Arms Control Association sees a comprehensive diplomatic strategy as the best and perhaps the only way to resolve the problem. Unfortunately, Iran has been unwilling to discuss the nuclear issue in a serious way. Washington and the other P5-plus-one states in our view need to redouble efforts to get a real dialogue going and explore every opportunity that appears on the horizon.

And the goal of the United States needs to be – and the international community – needs to be to persuade Iran to limit the ultimate size and scope of its program, to provide the additional transparency and cooperation with the IAEA that’s necessary to verify that Iran is not engaged in nuclear weapons work. But as we go forward, we all know that good policy requires a sober examination of good information.

And that’s why we’re here today. We’ve brought forward three authoritative experts on the various aspects of the issue. We’re going to be examining the status of the Iranian nuclear program.

We’re going to review the intelligence community’s assessments and the factors that can influence Iran’s decisions on its nuclear program. And then we’re also going to consider whether the so-called military option is a serious option for stopping Iran’s program or not.

We have three experts here, as I said. First, to address the status of Iran’s nuclear efforts is Mark Fitzpatrick. He’s with us today all the way from London. We’re very glad to have him. He’s the director of the Nonproliferation and Disarmament Program at IISS which is the International Institute for Strategic Studies. He served for 26 years in the U.S. State Department and last served as deputy assistant secretary for nonproliferation.

He’ll be followed by Greg Thielmann, who is a senior fellow at the Arms Control Association. Greg served for more than three decades in government, including as director of the strategic proliferation and military affairs office at the Department of State, its bureau of intelligence and research and most recently was a senior professional staff member on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence before joining the Arms Control Association.

And we’re also very honored to have with us today, batting cleanup, former congressman and Admiral Joe Sestak. He served in the Navy for 31 years and was the highest ranking military officer ever elected to Congress.

He represented the 7th district of Pennsylvania, not too far up the road from here, from 2007 to 2010. He commanded – we must keep in mind – an aircraft carrier battle group that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq with 30 U.S. and allied ships and more than 15,000 sailors and a hundred aircraft.

He is going to provide his authoritative perspective on the risks and realities of the so-called military option. So with that brief introduction, I’m going to invite Mark up to the podium to start us off. And after each of the speakers are done, we’re going to take your questions. So thanks for coming, Mark.

MARK FITZPATRICK: Thank you, Daryl, for the invitation. I want to make three key points. Number
one, I have high confidence that Iran does not today have a nuclear weapon, that they won’t have one tomorrow or next week or next month or a year from now. And that to claim otherwise by stringing together a list of worst-case assumptions borders on the irresponsible.

Number two, it’s also irresponsible to be complacent about Iran’s nuclear program because in all the key aspects of what it takes to be able to have a nuclear weapon, Iran has been making recent progress. So I have no confidence that Iran won’t have a nuclear weapon two years from now. I think if they wanted to go for it and if everything went right, they maybe could.

The third point is that we need to be clear what we mean when we talk about a nuclear Iran. It’s not at all inevitable, as Daryl said, that Iran will possess a nuclear weapon, that Iran will be nuclear armed. But I think it is inevitable that Iran will have a nuclear weapons capability because they already do.

So to elaborate on the first point that Iran will not have a nuclear weapon within the next year, some assessments have been published recently in this town by two media outlets that I highly respect otherwise that based their analysis on a string of worst-case assumptions. And I went through the original analysis and five leapt out at me.

Number one, it is the assumption that Iran would use an unproven method to produce highly enriched uranium that could get you a bomb’s worth in as short a time as possible.

The analysis that my institute in London has made in a report that we published earlier this year based our mathematics on the way that most countries have gone about producing highly enriched uranium, the way that Pakistan also used and that the Pakistani nuclear engineer A.Q. Khan sold to Libya and that the South African courts made public in their prosecution of two of the assistants to Khan.

It’s a four-stage process and it requires some configuration of piping and so forth. But the people who think that Iran could take a different process, one that has been explored in the literature by some very intelligent people, it’s called batch processing. It assumes that you don’t have to reconfigure any piping. You just put the low enriched uranium back through the same centrifuges and out would come bomb-usable highly enriched uranium. And it’s all theoretical. You know, I looked at the calculations.

They make sense but why would Iran use a process that nobody has ever been known to use before in practice? I think if they’re going to go for a bomb they’d use something that was tried and true and that they have the blueprints for.

The second worst-case assumption that some of these analyses make is – and it’s related to the first one – is that Iran would be able to produce enough highly enriched uranium before the IAEA inspectors would catch onto it because they think Iran would have to reconfigure any piping and that the Iranians would get started as soon as the one group of IAEA inspectors left and they’d be able to predict when the next group would come and they’d be able to within that window of time get there.

Now, that window of time on average is about one month between IAEA inspections. But it’s not exactly one month. Iran wouldn’t know when the next inspection would come because it’s a bit random. So there’s a built-in assumption that somehow Iran would be able to game the IAEA. It would be a big gamble.

The third worst-case assumption is that the amount of low enriched uranium that is necessary in order to produce a bomb’s worth of highly enriched uranium is static. And you can – you know, physicists can tell you how much it is.

But when I’ve talked to people who have actually produced weapons using highly enriched uranium, they say, you know, it’s a great difference between how much is necessary the first time for the first bomb and then for the subsequent bombs. So doing analysis you have to take into account what is sometimes called a wastage factor.
There’s a certain amount of the gasified form that gets caught up in the cold traps. And you can recapture it later but if you’re trying to produce as much highly enriched uranium as quickly as possible, you’ve got to take into account this wastage factor. And then when you process the gasified uranium to uranium metal, then form it, there’s another wastage factor there. Most analyses leave that out.

A fourth worst-case assumption is that once Iran produces enough highly enriched uranium for a weapon, they would quickly be able to form it into a bomb, that Iran would be able to carry out all of the steps for weaponization concurrently with producing the highly enriched uranium and then it would only be a matter of a couple of days before they’d have a bomb. In theory, I guess that’s right.

But in practice, for a country that’s never done it before, to be able to go through the conversion, the shaping, the assembly, all the steps needed to produce a nuclear weapon with the limited number of experts, some of whom are not here today because they’ve been decapitated – and I say that just as a matter of fact, not advocating one way or another. I don’t think Iran would be able to do it so quickly. Based on the unclassified literature, we estimate six months to weaponize. And that has to be added to the timeframe.

The fifth assumption in this worst-case analysis is that Iran would be so foolish as to go for broke to produce just one weapon. So all the assessments are made of how long do they get one weapon. But what country in their right mind would just go for one weapon, take all of the risks of being bombed and breaking out of the NPT to get just one. Maybe it wouldn’t work. Maybe they’d want to test it. Maybe they’d want one for second strike capability. So you know, pretty soon you’re up to four weapons. They’d need a handful, I think the way North Korea did.

So that’s why I say it’s irresponsible to say that Iran should be considered a nuclear armed state today because maybe they could within some short period of time. They couldn’t in that short a period of time.

Now, I don’t want to be complacent because as I say, it’s also irresponsible to think, well, we’ve got all the time in the world. Iran in many ways is moving ahead in all of the ways that you’d need to in order if you wanted a nuclear weapon.

If you look at the three things that you need for a nuclear weapon, you need enough fissile material, either highly enriched uranium or plutonium, you need to weaponize it and you need a delivery vehicle. So the IAEA reporting that just came out two weeks ago has given us a pretty good idea about the fissile material.

The latest report says that Iran has produced over 4,500 kilograms of 3.5 percent low enriched uranium, some portion of which has been enriched to 20 percent. Four thousand five hundred kilograms of 3.5 percent is enough fissile material for at least two weapons. Some say four weapons. I say two weapons because I take into account the additional amount needed for that first bomb.

The report also showed that Iran is moving ahead with putting centrifuges into its protected facility at Fordow inside a mountain where it’s hard to bomb and that it’s continuing 20 percent enrichment well beyond any justifiable civilian purpose.

I don’t think Iran has any justifiable purpose to produce any 20 percent enriched uranium because it can’t actually produce the fuel today that it says it would need to do it for the Tehran Research Reactor. But even if they could, they’ve got more than enough 20 percent for several years for that reactor. They’re still producing more.

So that’s worrisome. And they’re introducing larger numbers of second generation centrifuges that can produce enriched uranium two to three times quicker. So if you take all these factors into account, you have to reduce that timeline. And each one of these is worrisome. Together, they move the problem to a different level of a challenge.
The second thing you need is weaponization. That’s the hardest for people like me in the private sector to assess because it’s so highly classified. Iran keeps as much of it secret as it can and the IAEA is off limits to any of the weaponization work in Iran.

But the IAEA has got a lot of information from friendly governments. And if you’re reading the IAEA reports you see that in the latest one they said they have increasing concern about the evidence of possible military dimensions behind Iran’s nuclear activity.

Now, Secretary General Amano of the IAEA didn’t say what these additional – what the additional information he has that gives – that makes him more concerned. But he said he’d be telling us soon. Maybe it would be what sometimes we read about in the press.

There was a story in the Munich-based Süddeutsche Zeitung last month saying that North Korea had been assisting Iran with some dual-use nuclear data that is highly controlled because it can help scientists learn how to control a chain reaction. I’ve been somewhat skeptical about reports of North Korean nuclear cooperation with Iran because most of it just didn’t have the credibility. It didn’t have the confirmation.

This latest one has – is still not confirmed. It’s one report but I think there may be something there that I hadn’t seen so clearly before. OK, so then the last point you need to build a weapon, you need a delivery vehicle. Iran has a fleet of ballistic missiles under development, the most capable of which, the Sejil-2 is a solid fuel propelled and has a reach of at least 2,200 kilometers.

That means if it’s solid fuel, you can fuel it very quickly. It’s hard to preempt it. You don’t have much time. And because it’s got a 2,200-kilometer reach, they could launch it well within their inner hinterlands away from preemption, so – and it could still hit targets in American bases in the region or in Israel. That’s a worrisome missile.

When the IAEA produced a report about a year ago, we said they were still two to three years away of testing to be able to put that missile into operation. And until recently, it had been a mystery to me why Iran hadn’t conducted more test launches of the Sejil-2. The last one that Iran publicized at the time it was launched was in December 2009.

But recently they said actually they did one in February. They didn’t report it for six months later and then the British government confirmed that yes, there had been such a launch. And the interesting thing about that report is that Iran said it launched it 1,900 kilometers into the Indian Ocean. So that must mean they had to have some ships in the Indian Ocean to be able to observe that and that’s a new capability, that observation platform.

I don’t want to be alarmist, though, about Iran’s nuclear program, as I said in the beginning. For example, Iran has produced 70 kilograms of 20 percent enriched uranium, very close to being weapons usable. Seventy kilograms some say is, you know, getting pretty close to what you would need for a nuclear weapon.

Again, I would say if you take the amount needed for that first weapon, it’s not so close. It’s only about one-sixth the amount that would be needed for the first weapon. And then these advanced centrifuges Iran is producing, OK, they’ve got now 300 of them, the second generation in place.

I’m not sure how many more they can produce because sanctions are limiting Iran’s ability to acquire things like maraging steel that they would need to produce more. In short, as I said in the beginning, suggestions Iran could produce a nuclear weapon in a very short amount of time are irresponsible.

So a nuclear armed Iran is not inevitable. That’s my third key point. But they are nuclear capable. And to persuade Iran to give up enrichment entirely is probably – although a desirable goal, we’re probably not going to get there because there is so much support for enrichment across the political spectrum. Everybody in Iran thinks that enrichment is a national right. It’s become part of their sense of national sovereignty.
But there are four ways – for elements of a policy response that I think can keep Iran from crossing the line from capability to production. One is a containment policy, things like sanctions and other means of restricting Iran's ability to expand their program exponentially. Second is deterrence policies to dissuade Iran from crossing the line if they knew – and I think they probably do know – that if they cross the line it would be an invitation to an air strike.

Third is more intensive inspections, more instructive inspections because Iran may have some other facilities out there. Nobody's quite sure. They don't have very good operational security.

The facilities they've tried to keep secret have been discovered by good Western intelligence and some insider leaking in Iran. But if there were more intensive IAEA inspections, it would make it even harder for Iran to be able to be sure that they could produce nuclear weapons in secret. So more inspections obviously would be a good thing.

And finally, I think engagement will be absolutely crucial to any peaceful solution. Sanctions alone are not going to dissuade Iran because of the sense of national will. You don't want to bow to pressure but if you are engaged in something where there's a positive outcome, it's more possible.

The whole point of sanctions is to persuade Iran to come back to the negotiating table. But how would we know when they're ready to come back to the negotiating table if we're not talking with them, if we're not having some kind of a private, very quiet discussions?

I think we need that to be able to probe Iranian intention. So when the head of Iran's atomic energy agency said they'd be willing to put their facilities under IAEA control for five years, what's he mean by that? He said it didn't mean adopting additional protocol. But what does it mean? You know, we need to – we need to probe to find out.

In short, if there is less than two years before Iran theoretically could go for broke and get a nuclear weapon, let's use that two years wisely. Let's probe, and maybe Iran's not ready for any negotiations but we need to at least I think pull every diplomatic string to try to find out. Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. KIMBALL: Thank you very much, Mark. Now, we'll turn to Greg Thielmann, senior fellow with Arms Control Association. Greg?

GREG THIELMANN: Thank you, Daryl. The conclusions I draw from Mark’s remarks and from the previous assessments of the U.S. intelligence community is that a nuclear armed Iran is neither imminent nor inevitable.

Iran's current approach in the medium term is more likely aimed at developing an eventual nuclear breakout potential than actually deploying nuclear weapons. If this is the case, then it is extremely important that we use this time well to influence Tehran’s eventual decision on the nuclear weapons issue.

So I’d like to take a few minutes to do two things. First, to review the key conclusions of the U.S. intelligence community and then secondly to try to identify factors that could influence Tehran’s choice of whether to develop and deploy nuclear weapons or to seek a virtual weapons capability or to abandon entirely the nuclear program's military dimension.

Let me start with a review of some important judgments in the 2007 national intelligence estimate on Iran’s nuclear program. First dimension, the big surprise in the publically released summary of this estimate, Tehran had halted its nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2003 probably in response to international pressure, a halt lasting at least for several years.

And I would mention in passing that this would be the second time Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program. The first halt was ordered by Ayatollah Khomeini when he replaced the shah. The NIE reported that it only had moderate confidence the weapons program had not resumed by mid-2007 and that it did not know whether or not Iran eventually intended to develop nuclear weapons.
The NIE judged that convincing Iranian leaders to forego the development of nuclear weapons would be difficult but not impossible. More importantly, the NIE assessed that if Iran decided to produce nuclear weapons, it had the scientific, technical and industrial capacity eventually to do so.

After nearly three years, the intelligence community updated its findings in a so-called memorandum to holders. Unfortunately, this time the key judgments were not explicitly shared with the public. We’re therefore dependent on official unclassified testimony and leaked descriptions of the classified documents in the press to divine what changes the U.S. intelligence community thinks have taken place.

If we are to believe press accounts, the classified update completed earlier this year found that Iran has probably restarted nuclear weapons studies but it is not necessarily undertaken a comprehensive bomb development effort.

Indeed, the public testimony of the director of national intelligence, James Clapper, to congressional committees in February 2011 showed very little change in the earlier estimate’s key judgments.

According to Clapper, and I’m quoting, “We continue to assess Iran as keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.”

He continued, “We continue to judge Iran’s nuclear decision-making as guided by a cost-benefit approach which offers the international community opportunities to influence Tehran and that Iran’s technical advancement, particularly in nuclear – in uranium enrichment, rather, strengthens our assessment that Iran has the capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons, making the central issue its political will to do so.”

This judgment by the intelligence community is reinforced by the assessments of U.S. officials that even U.S. airstrikes would only delay, not prevent, an Iranian nuclear weapons capacity. So if we cannot force Iran to give up the nuclear weapons track, how can we dissuade it? I see two principal drivers in Tehran’s nuclear weapons aspirations.

The first is survival, both regime survival and national survival. And the second is the enhancement of Iran’s power and prestige. The international community has been much more successful in diffusing the second of these drivers than the first.

The longer and more blatantly Iran’s nuclear program has defied IAEA obligations and U.N. Security Council mandates, the more Iran’s power and prestige have suffered. Iran’s slow but steady movement to a nuclear weapons breakout capability has come at an increasing cost, economically, politically and militarily.

The economic costs of sanctions, while still tolerable, are becoming more onerous over time. Inhibitions on foreign investments and technology inputs, particularly in the natural gas production, will lead to stagnation in the most important sector of Iran’s economy. The diplomatic situation has worsened for Iran. It has not been able to divide the P5-plus-one despite the predictions of many including in the West.

Bilateral relations with Turkey and Iran’s Gulf neighbors have deteriorated. And close Syrian-Iranian ties are threatened by the turbulence in Syria. The military balance will also continue to slowly deteriorate, aggravated by the U.N. Security Council ban on Iranian heavy weapons imports and the robust military buildup by Iran’s Persian Gulf neighbors.

To sum things up, survival trumps pain. Tehran is feeling the heat from sanctions imposed in response to its a la carte attitude towards its IAEA obligations and its flaunting of U.N. Security Council resolutions. But it still apparently interprets steady progress towards a nuclear weapons option as serving its existential security objective of deterring attack.
The more the U.S. and Israel talk about regime change and preventive attack, the greater the perceived need will be for a nuclear deterrent. So what is to be done? My first advice is do no harm. Don’t overreach with U.S. unilateral sanctions, causing a backlash of others of Iran’s trading partners - particularly Russia and China.

This could jeopardize the overall effectiveness of the sanctions regime and destroy the solidarity among the P5-plus-one that has been successful so far at achieving the slowing down of Iran’s program and the raising of costs. Don’t launch a U.S. unilateral preventive attack on Iran or encourage one from Israel.

Either would not only undercut the efforts of Iranian reformers but also probably persuade the government that actual possession of nuclear weapons is the only way to protect the country from external assault. And second, get ready to exploit diplomatic opportunities. Keep the diplomatic option on the table by doing several things.

And one was alluded to I noticed by Admiral Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was expressing alarm over how many years we have had no military contacts between the U.S. and the Iranian military. And I noticed today’s press had a report that the U.S. government is actually considering some sort of emergency communications between the U.S. military and the Iranian navy.

This is a very serious danger, an unintended clash of naval forces in the Persian Gulf that could lead to consequences that neither side had planned. And it’s not just military contacts that would be useful. It’s diplomatic contacts.

We’re under an environment here where the formidable diplomatic resources of the United States are basically banned from having any contact with Iranian diplomats except on very limited special occasions. This is cutting us off from a source of information about diplomatic opportunities about what is going on in Iran.

I would also say that we need to demonstrate a willingness to talk with the Iranians without preconditions. If the Iranians erect preconditions to discussions, that’s one thing.

But it seems to me counterproductive for us to say we’re only going to talk to Iran under these narrow circumstances. Also I would propose consideration of nonnuclear confidence building measures. There are a number of things like an incident-at-sea agreement or environmental scientific initiatives, drug trafficking cooperation.

There are other areas where we obviously have a mutual interest that can be pursued. I would say we should encourage greater diplomatic involvement by other governments, particularly those who themselves have abandoned WMD aspirations.

Brazil comes to mind, South Africa, Libya, Kazakhstan. All of these countries have a particular credibility as having chosen a path that we would wish that Iran would choose and some of these countries have some degree of respect in Tehran.

We should not ignore the opportunities that this presents to us. Focus on the essential that can be won, persuading Iran’s leaders to honor Iran’s IAEA safeguards obligations and to accept robust international transparency measures. This is doable. This is what we should focus on.

Give up the unrealistic objective of forcing a permanent halt to Iran’s nuclear enrichment program. It’s already been mentioned that this has virtually no support inside Iran including among Iranian reformers. This doesn’t mean that we should abandon all efforts to negotiate constraints on the growth of Iranian enrichment. And it does seem to me reasonable to have some sort of relationship between the amount of uranium enriched and the possible use inside Iran of that enriched uranium.

Finally, and not coincidentally since I work for the Arms Control Association, we should demonstrate that nuclear weapons states can also make progress on nuclear arms control consistent with our NPT Article VI obligations. And that means we should move toward ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.
We should consider accelerating New START reductions. We’re going to get there anyway. Why not get there faster? And we should consider linking the phased adaptive approach to missile defenses in Europe with the actual threats against which those missile defenses are allegedly designed.

So why get so far ahead of an Iranian ICBM threat that does not exist? That’s some of my thoughts. Thank you for your attention. (Applause.)

MR. KIMBALL: Thank you, Greg. We’ve heard the military option alluded to. We’re going to hear more about that and other issues and questions on this important topic from former congressman and admiral, Joe Sestak. Thanks for being with us.

JOSEPH SESTAK: Good afternoon. I was taken and had a smile when Daryl said that he had three experts up here.

He reminded me when I got to Congress four-and-a-half years ago and I got elected to be vice chairman of a small business committee. And for a freshman, that’s extremely rare. And I can remember telling somebody at home about that and they just looked at me and said, I think Congress just wanted to demonstrate it had a sense of humor.

So I appreciate being adorned with the term expert with regard to Iran up here. But I’m glad to give my thoughts upon this, having operated out there and thought a bit about it while I was working at the National Security Council for President Clinton as director of defense policy at the White House. And today I want to make three points.

First, much like the diplomatic option should never be off the table, I also believe the military option should not be off the table as it provides potential to our negotiations that are ongoing. But second, that option is not a responsible one, either with regard to offering a solution that has any permanence to it or in its cost being commensurate with the benefits that might accrue.

And therefore, third, I believe we have to broaden the pursuit of our diplomatic efforts with a wider sphere and inclusion of greater Iranian self-interests that they have, as you said, Greg, with no necessary preconditions on the table. And trying to buy time with what at the end I’ll address as nonkinetic means because time is extremely important, not just in what we have now but in extending it.

My experience during my 31 years as a Naval officer, including, as I mentioned, at the White House, is that one should never take an option off the table when you have strategic negotiations ongoing.

In fact, Ambassador Pickering at the ACA gathering last June said the same thing when he commented that there is great value, as he spoke about Iran, in having a military potential in the minds of people you have to deal with in the diplomatic sphere. That for good or ill reinforces your negotiating potential.

But a military strike whether it’s by land or air against Iran would make the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion look like a cakewalk with regard to the impact on the United States’ national security.

I believe the cost of Iran’s possession of a nuclear weapon mated to a missile would be quite significant, first in terms of regional security for our interests, that of our friends, that of our allies, for our own freedom of movement, of the security of our troops in that region. I believe it would foment a destabilizing regional arms – nuclear arms race.

And I believe that there would be a loss of our influence and therefore of our ability to move regional issues steadily towards our interest. I came to respect the Iranian pride when I worked with its navy just prior to the fall of the shah.

I came to appreciate the professionalism of its military, its navy over the decades that followed as I operated at sea and saw a remarkable courtesy given at times when our operations took our respective forces close to one another.
But I also saw calculated risk taking, dangerous moments at sea when Iran – separate, independent Revolutionary Guard sea forces would make sudden runs at us in small swift boats, testing us and our responses or tried to seize some small boarding craft which they thought might not be guarded.

Over these decades, I came truly to appreciate however the pride of this country. I mean, after all, even we call it the Persian Gulf. But also I came to think through the less than calculated at times incident that could spark an unwanted violent collision of our two nations.

It’s why, Greg, I recommended as a young commander of a ship in the early ’90s that we should have an incident-at-sea agreement with this country. I recommended it as an admiral in command of an aircraft carrier battle group in the Persian Gulf. We had it with the Soviet Union and following that with the People’s Republic of China. It might have been the beginning of something more or at least the prevention of something worse.

But I also understand the cost of a military strike for our nation. Can it be done? Sure. But I agree with Secretary of Defense Gates who said anyone who would recommend a land invasion – and I saw planning beyond planning for it – should have his head examined. The cost is not worth any benefit of a land invasion, a conflict that might never end, at least not on our terms.

Nor would it ever cease expanding. It would take up to 1.5 million men and women if you use any type of equivalency to the metric that we used in Baghdad, in Iraq to control that insurgency. You would have a rallied population that is three times the size of Iraq’s, girded potentially by millions not just of the Revolutionary Guards but a sebaceous militia that can melt into the citizenry and a land mass that is four times larger than Iraq’s.

The price of invasion would beastronomical. I think it would be incalculable, particularly at this moment in our history as China continues its economic march uncontested the strategic depravity for us for this century. On the other hand, while an airstrike would be problematic, extremely challenging, requiring many multiple runs of assets and not be of any permanent consequence for stopping the pursuit of nuclear weaponry.

In fact, I believe it would do the opposite, igniting determination in pursuit of a political goal of Iran’s for a nuclear capability, it could be – it would be at least in the short-term successful in destroying or impairing for a while an infrastructure intended to help the pursuit of a nuclear weapon.

But with imperfect intelligence of dispersed and buried nuclear facilities and its infrastructure and a credible air defense system in opposition, it would require constant reassessment of strikes that would make the attack be very long in the number of days it would take and the assets would be quite heavy to bear that load.

There are of course the unintended consequences – Iranian strikes from coastal batteries and platforms at sea, our platforms at sea or by mobile missions on other nations where our forces are today.

But it would also release terror by networks that are supported by Iran – Hamas, Hezbollah. So as a result, avoiding mission creep is unlikely. It is simply hard to know. In fact, I would argue one can’t know how such a conflict ends nor the final dimensions of the consequences of such an attack by us.

But frankly, yes, sufficient damage to close those facilities for some time is also probable but at even greater unknown costs. So that’s why I agree with Senator Chuck Hagel, who said that a military strike is not a responsible option in terms of offering a solution to the problem, certainly not without opening up even more challenges for our national security.

I think it’s wise to think why and how we use our military. We use it for our national interests. First, our vital interests, which have to do with our survivability or humanitarian interests which have to do with our ideals or in between those two, our important interests that can change the character and the wellbeing of the world to degrade our interests significantly over time. And that is where this sits.
We have to keep in mind what it often takes, that we tended not to do well in recent history to determine whether to use our force. And it can range from understanding whether we have a clear achievable mission, whether we know what the timeline and the specific milestones are, if we know what our exit strategy is in terms of success or having to change the objective for the proper exit.

In sum, the costs and risk of U.S. military option needs to be judged commensurate with the takes that are involved and if there will be a lasting improvement because of our action, having adequately pursued before you take men and women I served with into harm’s way, have you adequately pursued all nonmilitary means that offer a reasonable chance of success.

It’s why I believe – although I don’t tell my wife this – what Napoleon said – if I were to be in love, I would analyze it bit by bit because you can’t ask how or why enough, particularly when you take the youth of a nation to war.

So I also agree with another senator, in addition to Senator Hagel; Senator Sam Nunn who told his staff about the horse that could talk, where back in medieval days a thief was sentenced to hang. But he turned to the king as he took his punishment sentencing and said, please, give me 30 days and I’ll teach your horse to talk. The judge said, what the heck, 30 days he’ll hang anyway. I can wait.

And as he’s walking away with this thief, the bailiff says, why the heck you asked for 30 days? You can’t teach a horse to talk. But the thief replied, maybe, but in 30 days I might die anyway. In 30 days, the king could die and the next, his heir, could give me amnesty or in 30 days who knows, I might teach that horse to talk.

My point is time, which is mentioned often as a stiff milestone, is something that in the art of diplomacy is absolutely priceless at times if you can give more time for something to occur. So as was mentioned by Ambassador Thomas Pickering at your association, we did take a military option although he didn’t use that term.

He called it euphemistically sabotage, Stuxnet, which our military prides itself on having domination of the common of the seas by our Navy and having domination of the commons of the air by our Air Force. But increasingly and not enough we need domination of that commons of cyberspace which gave us, because of its significant impact, gave us more needed time.

Because I think what you’ve seen in the past decade is the placement of our military whether Afghanistan and Iraq to Libya where we haven’t been able to achieve in the timeframes that we set the objectives that have been given and that when objectives are finally achieved, they’re lower objectives in terms of being less and messier.

So the concern the ambassador had when you think of using our military to where he said they are significant to be on the table because they help our negotiating potential.

His concern he stated was also one where he said, you know, we’ve begun a self-initiated undermining of our long-term capacity to take advantage of our military and I would argue even our financial, economic backing because it has been ineffective to have met the modern-day problems in these conflicts on the timelines, the scales that our political leaders have seemed to set, which weakens our negotiation.

So I believe as I summarize here at the end that, yeah, the military option should not, as the ambassador spoke, be off the table because it does give great potential to our political negotiations. But the option is not a responsible one with regard to offering a solution to our problem of any permanence nor in the cost of - nor in it being commensurate, the benefits with the costs.

But finally, and I argue this is primarily the military’s fault, we need not only to broaden our pursuit of the diplomatic efforts to a wider sphere of Iranian interests, as you said, Greg, without preconditions necessarily set but also this nonkinetic military means, something to where we will purchase a ship before dominating that domain above invisible to us has to be thought carefully
through because there was no retaliation for what was an attack – nonkinetic as it was. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. KIMBALL: Thank you very much. Now, it is your turn to pose questions. I ask that you ask a brief question, tell us who you’re directing your question to and we’ll do our best to answer. I see a couple of hands. Why don’t we start here and go around? And wait for the microphone so we can hear your question. Thank you.

Q: I’d like to ask Admiral Sestak if his views are widely shared among the military leadership in this country or is yours a maverick view.

ADM. SESTAK: Good term. I’d hesitate to speak for others expect for what – a little of what I know but mostly of what I’ve read. I have found, first off if I could, my time in the military to have shown me how conservative in wanting to use the military our leaders tend to be rightly of our services. They truly understand the cost attendant to doing it, that they and their men and women will bear.

So when I read comments such as General Cartwright’s, that in testimony before the Senate candidly laid out the unknown or potential lack of upside of using the military option or when you read the article written by the director of J5 – joint staff – joint J5 strategy division – just recently published where this colonel lays out that can it be done, sure, but here are the costs.

I would say that once what was very prevalent in the military – proffering candid advice – but has been less prevalent I would argue in the past decade is beginning to be heard rightly on this, in correctly a more public way prior to internal probably deep deliberations.

So I can’t tell you it’s shared but just based on those two – you know, the J5 position is a prime up-and-coming star and Hoss Cartwright which there is no better officer. I think that there are those that I wish their voices might have been heard a decade ago.

MR. KIMBALL: Yes, sir, over here? If you could identify yourself also?

Q: Gareth Porter, Inter Press Service. I guess this question is initially to Admiral Sestak but I would actually like the other panelists to comment as well if they would be willing to do so. You’ve very, very well laid out the argument against the military option but at the same time have insisted more than once in your remarks that it should not be taken off the table.

Now, this obviously represents basic national security thinking in this country going back decades, that you never remove a threat to use military force because it gives you negotiating leverage.

But in the case of Iran, I’d like to ask whether there isn’t another history here that contradicts that very hoary conventional wisdom which is that the Iranians have been responding to the explicit or implicit threat of attack by Israel and the United States now for years.

They have had to take that into account in their policy and arguably the result has been to make them less willing to make concessions to the IAEA specifically as well as to negotiate with the United States and its allies in P5-plus-two.

MR. KIMBALL: So your question is?

Q: So my question is, is it not the case that there is a heavy negotiating and policy price to be paid for keeping a threat on the table which as you’ve argued and many people have pointed out cannot be a responsible policy.

ADM. SESTAK: It’s a good question. The reason I feel, though, with due consideration to what you laid out, why I would keep it on is when I pulled into a port, whether it was Egypt, Saudi Arabia, you name it, man, I mean, particularly when I was in command of an aircraft carrier battle group, parliamentary leaders would come to see me.

I don’t think the captain, with all due respect to Greece, which for the first time sailed one ship to the
Persian Gulf, got that type of reception. And my point is that without the military as one of the elements of our power – not that you like Teddy Roosevelt, walk quietly, carry a big stick – I think that helps us, as the ambassador points out, to having it there.

Now, do I believe that that is the one we should be brandishing in terms of preventive strike? No. I think that strategy is completely wrong – or preventive war. However, as the CIA said in its assessment of 2007, and this is why I believe it needs to be there but not the leader, that the reason that the report came out that Iran had ceased a few years earlier for a period of time the pursuit of a nuclear capability in the early 2000s was because of the cohesive emphasis by European nations and others, diplomatically and otherwise, and they did not feel it was worth the cost as it was the benefit.

So I buy your point that the leader needs to be diplomacy. I think it has the greatest impact. But I don’t find nations with no militaries being the leader out there in a tough world. And so –

Q: (Off mic.)

ADM. SESTAK: I didn’t say threaten.

Q: (Off mic.)

ADM. SESTAK: Right. I didn’t say threaten. I said –

Q: (Off mic.)

ADM. SESTAK: No, I said on the table. Off the table means, for example, as President Clinton said, I won’t use ground troops in Bosnia. It’s off the table. And to say I won’t use a military strike against Iran means off the table. I don’t think it should be off the table. But I think it’s an irresponsible as a citizen, you know, out here, use of that tool to use it. I think it helps our negotiations tremendously in a way.

MR. KIMBALL: Mark, did you want to contribute on this?

MR. FITZPATRICK: Yeah, I just want to add a small point. In posing the question, Mr. Porter suggested that Iran has been less willing to enter into talks because of U.S. and Israel putting or leaving military options on the table. I think it’s an interesting evaluation that one could equally draw a different conclusion.

The time that Iran was more in a negotiating phase was actually during a time when a more, shall we say, aggressive leadership was in the White House in terms of using military options. I’m talking about during the George W. Bush years, Iran was engaging in negotiations with the Europeans.

Now, was that because Bush was more hardline than Obama? No, you can’t draw that kind of a cause-and-effect. It’s because of internal developments in Iran that have led Iran to be less willing to enter into negotiations.

MR. KIMBALL: And I just – one other point on this. I think – I mean, one of the things that I think is important to draw from the discussion that Admiral Sestak introduced here is the tremendously high cost of any such action. And when American policymakers talk about the military option, they need to consider the many issues that he laid out and they need to consider those ramifications.

And when they do, I think they would come to the similar conclusion you came to which is that this is not the responsible option. It’s not the first option. We need to use the time that we have in order to pursue a diplomatic option. I think we had a question here in the middle. Sir, if you could ask your question, identify yourself? Thank you.

Q: Faison Ilyich (ph), WPI. I just wanted to pick up on what Greg alluded to and some others and take it a little farther, because it seems to me the bottom line is that for 30 years or more these two countries haven’t been able to reach a modus vivendi. And it’s because of psychological barriers and it’s because of the gridlocks in each country, the conflicts that exist.
Shouldn’t we just come to the conclusion that these guys can’t negotiate and we should go to some people outside this small circle of, you know, usual suspects and bring in some kind of a (yenta?) to do the job? I mean, this conversation has been repeated so many times and I don’t think it’s going to get us anywhere.

The conversation, the approach to the problem has to change and policy people usually call it, you know, this is too touchy-feely or, you know – but there is really a completely different framework I think needed to solve this problem.

MR. KIMBALL: Mark or Greg, if you could expand upon some of the points you made about how to pursue this diplomatic approach in a way that is more successful than we’ve seen in the past?

MR. THIELMANN: Well, I gave some general ideas toward approach. But I would be a little less pessimistic. I mean, it hasn’t escaped my notice anyway that in December of 2001 we not only were able to come to an agreement – a multilateral agreement with Iran – on a vital issue to Iran and us, that is the future of Afghanistan.

But we went through a process in which Jim Dobbins, the U.S. negotiator, said that Iran was the key – the key agent in making that happen. Well, it’s not that far removed in time. This was post-9/11 after all. It was Supreme Leader Khamenei who was in charge of Iran. And yet it happened.

I mean, and the abrupt end of that fairly promising agreement was the U.S. declaring Iran part of the axis of evil because three things go better together than two I guess. It can happen. I think it can happen again.

But I suggested that we need a lot of help now because the level of trust is so low on the part of the U.S. and the Iranians in each other that we may be able to get useful help from other countries in making something happen again.

MR. KIMBALL: Mark?

MR. FITZPATRICK: Yeah, when the questioner posed the question, I heard him – I thought I heard him say that Iran and the United States were having such a difficulty in coming – reaching any conclusions. Can’t we find some other people to negotiate? So I wondered did that mean regime change in Iran, the different? No, I knew you didn’t mean that. But – I’m sorry, I’m being facetious.

But you know, the United States is a central part of Iran’s national interest. They negotiated with the Europeans but the Europeans couldn’t deliver one of the key elements of interest. They could not deliver a lifting of U.S. sanctions and they couldn’t deliver the kind of security guarantees that only the United States can offer.

And I agree with Admiral Sestak that if countries engaged in these kinds of negotiations don’t bring the kind of security leverage that the United States has, they won’t be able to reach something.

When Brazil and Turkey entered into a negotiation with Iran a year ago and they concluded the Tehran Declaration, you know, and kind of gave the appearance that they had negotiated some deal, Turkey and Brazil can’t negotiate a deal on fuel swap because they can’t deliver any fuel.

Only France or Russia possibly or Argentina could deliver the fuel. So somebody who can deliver what Iran needs has to be involved in the negotiations to be successful.

ADM. SESTAK: I had a comment, please?

MR. KIMBALL: Yeah.

ADM. SESTAK: You know, sir, I was struck. General Eikenberry, who later became Ambassador Eikenberry in Afghanistan, when he was general there, I asked him once just after I got to Congress in testimony he was giving whether Iran had the same interest we had, similar interest we had in
Iraq – in Afghanistan.

And his answer was yes. They wanted stability. They wanted it on their terms but they wanted
stability. They didn’t like al-Qaida. And he went on with a list of things. And to the argument that’s
been made to broaden our engagement diplomatically, no preconditions, more of their interest,
there is some commonality of interest I would argue.

You know, if at sometimes people, like I think you are in the Bush administration, just seemed to say
no talking. I think that’s harmful because then you end up having to use the military where you
might not have to.

MR. KIMBALL: Yes, sir?


I want to ask the flipside of Gareth’s question about the negotiations, which is if the military option is
irresponsible and it’s the equivalent of saying stop enrichment or we’re going to shoot ourselves in
the head, then why don’t we do – I mean, Hillary Clinton sort of opened the door toward this a few
months ago – early this year I guess – when she said that Iran does have the right to enrich uranium.

Why doesn’t the president simply say that Iran has the right to enrich uranium? We’ll put that on the
table and you can enrich uranium all you want as long as you accede to the more intrusive
inspections and oversight that we’re asking for, and then we have a win-win.

I mean, it mystifies me to this day why we haven’t gotten off that dime. And I was in Tehran a
couple of years ago and I talked to a lot of people there about it and they’re all willing to bite on that
– I mean, at all kinds of levels inside and outside of government.

So and by the way, you know, John Kerry has said that too and then he kind of backed down. I don’t
know if it’s they’re afraid of AIPAC. I don’t know if they’re afraid of the Israel lobby and its cronies in
the neocon – planet neocon or what it is.

But this seems to me at least a way of testing Iran’s intentions because if we say that and they still
don’t negotiate, then I think we have a different problem. So and no one has even mentioned this on
the panel today. So I mean, I don’t understand what negotiation is if we can’t, you know, get off the
dime. We’re not losing anything by saying that.

MR. KIMBALL: Well, we’ve alluded to it. But why don’t you expand upon it, Mark, and I can address
that point also?

MR. FITZPATRICK: Yeah. We’ve been down this road before. The offer to accept Iranian enrichment
has been on the table since at least the last five years when the Europeans and the United States,
Russia and China all agreed that if Iran were to persuade the international community that its
nuclear intentions were peaceful, that they would not foreclose Iran having an enrichment –
resuming enrichment.

That was part of what was tabled with Iran in 2006 and repeated in 2008, and what Hillary Clinton
said in December in Bahrain was not real different from what has been U.S. policy in concert with its
negotiating partners.

But the idea that this means that allowing Iran to enrich today as much as they want would imply a
willingness to suspend credulity on what are Iran’s intentions.

There are so many reasons to have suspicion of Iran’s intentions, all of the ways in which their
nuclear program has military connections, the production of 20 percent enriched uranium that has
no civilian purpose, the various aspects of evidence of military weapons design work and so forth,
that I don’t think it makes much sense to say that Iran should be allowed to have as much
enrichment as they want so that they could have – be within a stone’s throw of having a nuclear
weapon.
I think it does make sense to accept that in a negotiation process you’re not going to forbid Iran forever and ever to have no enrichment. That’s part of what I think would be a negotiated settlement, some enrichment, limited so that Iran couldn’t quickly break out to get nuclear weapons.

MR. KIMBALL: And that, just to be clear and for the record – I mean, what Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has said – and I think she said it most recently on March 1st before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs is that it is the U.S. government’s position that, quote, “under very strict conditions and having responded to the international community’s concerns, Iran would have a right to enrich uranium under IAEA inspections.”

So and furthermore, just to be clear, the U.N. Security Council resolutions call for Iran to suspend its enrichment operations as a confidence building measure. That’s not a demand to permanently suspend, but as a confidence building measure and oftentimes people get these two things confused.

So I mean, from the ACA perspective, I mean, I would agree with Mark that an unlimited Iranian enrichment program without answering the IAEA’s concerns about military activities and without a reasonable constraint upon those capabilities down the road would not be advisable. Iran cites its Article IV nonproliferation treaty rights. It argues that that gives it the right to pursue enrichment.

But the nonproliferation treaty also requires of Iran and other non-nuclear weapon states under Articles II and III that it not seek to receive any assistance in the manufacture of nuclear weapons and not to accept and to comply with - and to accept and comply with safeguards against the diversion of nuclear technology for military purposes.

So with nuclear rights come responsibilities and I think what's essentially behind the secretary of State’s position is that that right can be exercised if the responsibilities are fulfilled.

So I agree with you that one of the key problems is getting to the point where the two sides are actually discussing in a realistic, quiet manner how we get to that stage. And that is part of the struggle and that is part of why several of us are arguing that the United States needs to redouble its effort with this aim in mind to try to get past the barriers that have existed for the last several years.

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. KIMBALL: Well, the Iranian – the Iranian view as expressed in a recent letter to Lady Ashton of the EU is that Iran is complaining that the West is not respecting its nuclear rights. What has not happened is there has not been a clear communication that cuts through a lot of the rhetoric from the Iranian side about what those rights require in terms of the responsibilities.

So I don’t think the U.S. negotiating position has to be changed so much as it needs to be pursued more intelligently and with more vigor in the time ahead. Do we have other questions from the floor? Yes, sir?

Q: This is for Mark. Last week at a panel of the Atlantic Council, David Albright from the Institute for Science and International Security said he thought that the effects of the last year, the sanctions, the sabotage, the U.N. resolution, that had the joint effect of effectively capping Iran’s centrifuge program.

He didn’t think there were many more IR-1 centrifuges they could make and he thought they were having great difficulty getting the materials for the more advanced IR-2 centrifuges. I was wondering what you thought and how you were assessing their progress.

MR. FITZPATRICK: I would reach a similar conclusion but maybe with more tentativeness because I don’t have maybe as many insights as David might have into the intelligence findings. But it does seem clear that Iran has a limit of how many IR-1s it can introduce. It’s had 8,000 now for three, four years almost.
It seems to have reached some kind of a limit, although I do note that the new cascade of IR-1s that was introduced into Fordow was apparently a new one, not transferred from Natanz. So they were able to build a few more. I also – I believe with some level of confidence, but not high confidence, that Iran has limits on how many of the second generation centrifuges it can produce.

I think it has limits on the amount of maraging steel because of sanctions that prevent it from getting more and if so, that means that application of sanctions, whether they affect Iran’s decision-making process has been very, very beneficial in at least achieving an important objective.

Whether that will continue or not – I mean, Iran still is continuing to enrich uranium. So it may be capping their ability to expand it rapidly but it hasn’t capped the amount of uranium they keep producing.

MR. KIMBALL: Yes, sir?

Q: Ali Gharib with Think Progress. If I could just ask two really quick questions that are both kind of political. One is the balancing the regime survival with people that back the sort of whatever is left of the Green opposition movement, and if those two things – because there’s a lot of calls, especially with the Arab Spring, for more Western support for these kinds of opposition movements.

And secondly is the sort of geopolitics of it where in Afghanistan at the Bonn Conference we had a lot of allies and regional allies of the world gathered around the same goal of a stable Afghanistan.

And on the other side of Iran and the Middle East we’ve got a different situation where a lot of the Arab kingdoms and little sheikdoms in the Gulf are incredibly hostile, as well as of course Israel. And so how do you balance those alliances with those countries with engaging with Iran on something like the nuclear issue? Thank you.

MR. KIMBALL: Greg or Admiral Sestak, you want to take a stab at that?

MR. THIELMANN: Go ahead.

ADM. SESTAK: I mean, I’m happy to comment but – (inaudible).

MR. THIELMANN: I may not have captured the first question too well, Ali, but I acknowledge that you have with some of the – some of Iran’s neighbors there’s much less of a community of interest or more difficult to find commonality whether it’s what name you call the Persian Gulf or those of greater issues.

So I acknowledge that that is a problem and something we have to deal with. But there’s a lot of – there should be a lot of common ground in pursuit of the end that we seek and that is a non-nuclear-armed Iran.

I mean, none of its neighbors want it to be nuclear armed and I would argue that Iran can achieve prosperity and enhance its power without being nuclear armed as well.

So I don’t – I don’t see any deal breakers even taking into consideration some of the complicated politics of the region and in fact some of the intents like Saudi desire not to see a nuclear armed Iran, one would think one could channel into constructive approaches to prevent that.

MR. KIMBALL: All right, why don’t we take a couple more questions? In the first row, please?

Q: Thank you. Benjamin Tua. On the enrichment issue, it seems that we’ve kind of put ourselves in a corner because people haven’t explicitly mentioned the fact that they’re enriching in part to have fuel for their research reactor. And when it seemed as if the Turks and the Brazilians had gotten some kind of agreement, we pulled the rug out from under two countries whom we had encouraged to pursue an agreement.

And someone mentioned that, well, they don’t have the fuel France does, but obviously we were
communicating with the French and making sure that that didn’t happen. So it seems to me that we really do need not just to redouble our efforts but to sort of maybe take a new track. I am encouraged by this idea of a new communications channel and this may just take things in a different direction.

MR. KIMBALL: OK, Greg and Mark, you want to address the failed effort earlier this year to pursue the fuel swap concept?

MR. FITZPATRICK: Yeah, first of all, I think it’s a bogus argument that Iran is producing 20 percent enriched uranium for the Tehran Research Reactor for fuel because they can’t actually make the fuel today. It’s not beyond their intellectual means. They will be able to at some point.

But it’s some point away. In the meantime, they have options to buy the medical isotopes as they have been doing. They could also have approached Argentina or France and asked them to supply the fuel. They didn’t do that.

So if they had been serious about it – they didn’t go about it by asking the two countries that produce it. They did it as a gambit to try to give themselves a plausible reason to produce something that was very close to weapons-usable fuel.

The United States caught them on it and offered the deal that Ahmadinejad first tentatively accepted, as you know, in October 2009 but then ran into a political firestorm in Tehran and couldn’t follow through on the deal.

Enter Brazil and Turkey, tried to reconstruct the deal but now under conditions that are highly favorable to Iran and that obviated all of the key confidence building elements that were in the first deal, namely that Iran would have shipped out of the country the bulk of its low enriched uranium so they couldn’t have enough for a weapon.

That was the confidence building aspect and by the time May came around and if they sent out the same amount, they still have enough theoretically for a weapon. And there was no word about the 20 percent uranium. In fact, the day the deal was signed, the Iranians said, we’re going to continue the 20 percent enriched uranium. How do you like those apples?

So you know, there was no political basis that the United States and its European and Russian and Chinese negotiating partners couldn’t follow through with the sanctions in the U.N. that have actually now for the first time applied pressure to Iran. That doesn’t mean that a deal couldn’t be struck.

I think there were some very important elements of that deal. The precedent of sending the fuel out of the country was a very good thing. I wish it could have been built upon. It was too bad that it, you know, fell apart like that. I don’t think it was handled so well by various parties. OK, maybe the United States, you know, sent some mixed signals.

I am told by people in the administration that they told the Brazilians and the Turks very, very clearly what the conditions had to be and they were not just the ones that were spelled out in the letter from President Obama to President Lula. But OK, I see there is some way that signals were missed.

But also, I don’t think there was very good communication with the French who actually had to be the ones to provide the fuel because if you look at the small points of that Tehran deal of May 2010, the French didn’t like it at all and there were parts of that deal that were just not possible – physically possible, so could have done better on both – on all sides.

MR. KIMBALL: Greg?

MR. THIELMANN: And I just wanted to express a somewhat more sympathetic point of view about the Brazilian and Turkish effort. I thought, for example, that the fact that a lot more low enriched uranium had been enriched at that point was not a deal killer.

It would still have been a good agreement as far as I’m concerned, even with the passage of time
and even though it wouldn’t have – it would have theoretically allowed enough low enriched uranium that could eventually be changed to a high enriched state and so forth. But the deal killer for me was the 20 percent and with that I agree with Mark.

The Iranians said in February that they were enriching to 20 percent in order to get – in order to get new reactor fuel. And the fact that they didn’t really have the capability to make the fuel plates is a very important thing to know. But it still allowed them to have the talking point.

But once they said that even with this deal that would give them enough and deliver the fuel plates, they were going to keep the 20 percent anyway. That was just - made patently obvious that they were not serious about getting to a conclusion on the nuclear swap arrangement from my point of view.

MR. KIMBALL: Yes?

ADM. SESTAK: Could I ask you on your comment, missed signals, you know, missed opportunity, does that show the downside of not being at the table with them directly?

MR. FITZPATRICK: Yeah.

MR. KIMBALL: OK. I think we’re going to have probably one or two last questions. Right up front, please?

Q: Thank you. Yeah, Jim Ostroff with Platts Nuclear Publications. If I could, just trying to get an overview, some idea right now about the total amount of fuel – LEU, HEU – that Iran holds and let me ask about the Bushehr reactor. They say it’s just starting. Where is it's at – where is it at and what is its outlook?

MR. KIMBALL: Mark, you want to tackle that?

MR. FITZPATRICK: Well, Iran doesn’t have any fuel that they’ve produced themselves – LEU or - I mean, but you didn’t mean fuel. You meant how much of low enriched uranium have they -

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. FITZPATRICK: Yeah, yeah, I know. My point is I’m trying to drive home the point that they can’t actually produce the fuel. They can produce the enriched uranium and they have 4,500 kilograms of the 3.5 percent that they have produced, although they used about 400 kilograms of that to produce 70 kilograms of 20 percent which is on the border to HEU.

And by my analysis, that 70 kilograms is about one-sixth what they would need for the first bomb and the 4,500 kilograms is enough for two weapons if they were to further enrich it. That’s a big if, of course.

MR. KIMBALL: All right, yes, right here, please? And this will be the final question.

Q: Dalton Onig (ph). With Turkey and Egypt now seem to be joining forces or on the verge of an agreement to cooperate and project their influence over the Middle East, how – what kind of influence would this have on Iran and its nuclear program?

ADM. SESTAK: Could you repeat the question, just -

Q: On Turkey and Egypt – early on, they went to Egypt and they talked about expanding their cooperation. Obviously they wanted to project their influence over the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

What kind of impact will this have on the Iranian nuclear program? Both of them obviously aren’t interested in Iran pursuing a nuclear program. How could they – what kind of influence will that have?
ADM. SESTAK: I think there’s maybe two possible impacts. One is if you look at what are Iran’s motivations to pursue these capabilities, it’s been mentioned, you know, it’s prestige and regional power and also for deterrence.

If they see their regional rivals increasing their influence in the region, maybe it would give them all the more reason to seek a nuclear capability in order to balance the now stronger political weight of Egypt and Turkey combined. You know, on the other hand, if they think that somehow their security situation has been improved by a different line up of forces in the region, maybe that would have a different kind of impact on their motivations.

But you know, it’s very hard to understand what would affect their motivations. We can see them continuing to move toward this capability regardless of administrations in the United States that are probably the most important factor. So it’s hard to answer your question.

MR. KIMBALL: All right. I want to draw this session to a conclusion. It’s hard to summarize the many issues and points that have been made here today. Great presentations from our key experts.

But I think there are two or three key points that seem to me that come through that I just want to reiterate here at the end, which is that an Iranian nuclear weapon is neither imminent nor inevitable for Iran might make a strategic decision on whether to build one or not, we have to utilize the time that we have to achieve a diplomatic solution.

Sanctions can be most effective in slowing Iran’s nuclear missiles program if they are targeted, if they have international support. But sanctions alone cannot dissuade Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and they cannot be a substitute for sustained diplomacy. Military strikes on Iran would be counterproductive at best, even if this is an option that our policymakers are going to be keeping on the table, so to speak.

And while diplomacy has been incredibly difficult to pursue in the current environment, it does remain the best option. We see a way forward to build a solution that respects Iran’s so-called nuclear rights but that limits the overall capacity of the program and addresses the continuing questions the IAEA and the international community has about the military aspects.

This will not be the last session that we have on this or that others have on this. But we hope you found it helpful. There’s going to be a transcript of the proceedings online at the Arms Control Association website within two or three days.

And I want to thank the Arms Control Association members and donors for making this possible, especially the Ploughshares Fund which has been supporting ACA’s work on the Iranian nuclear puzzle. Join me in thanking Joe Sestak and Mark Fitzpatrick and Greg Thielmann for their presentations. Thank you all. (Applause.)

(END)