A Preventive War Against Iran? Sound Familiar?

Events

Remarks as delivered by Greg Thielmann, Senior Fellow, Arms Control Association at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan.
Ann Arbor, Michigan
September 20, 2012

Today is very close to the tenth anniversary of my retirement from the U.S. Foreign Service. I remember very well the national mood at that time. The country was still reeling from the 9/11 attacks one year earlier and the George W. Bush Administration was associating al-Qaida, which had perpetrated the attacks, with Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship in Baghdad, which had nothing to do with them. That spring, the president had dubbed Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as part of an “axis of evil,” bent on developing weapons of mass destruction. The president had announced a change in U.S. military doctrine, arguing that the nation had to be ready to strike first at countries, which might pose a WMD threat in the future. Congress, meanwhile, was funding Iraqi opposition groups seeking regime change.

And exactly ten years ago today, the once and future prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, wrote these words in The Wall Street Journal:

[Saddam Hussein] is a dictator who is rapidly expanding his arsenal of biological and chemical weapons, who has used these weapons of mass destruction against his subjects and his neighbors, and who is feverishly trying to acquire nuclear weapons. …

Two decades ago it was possible to thwart Saddam's nuclear ambitions by bombing a single installation. Today nothing less than dismantling his regime will do.

Does any of this sound familiar? Now I know that there is a difference between Iraq and Iran – and that it is more than the last letter of a four-letter word. But I also recall Mark Twain’s comment that: although “history does not repeat itself, it does rhyme.”

I want to speak today about the rhyme and reason of Iran’s nuclear program, which has so bedeviled our already difficult bilateral relationship.

Once upon a time, about a century ago, the United States stood high in the esteem of Iranians. One martyr to the cause of Iranian democracy in 1909 was a 24-year old Nebraskan named Howard Baskerville. He died in defense of the young constitution of Iran, fighting counter-revolutionaries near Tabriz. In 1911, a 34-year old American named Morgan Shuster became a hero of Iranian democracy while serving as Treasurer General of the Persian Empire when, answering only to the Persian Parliament, he defied the imperial demands of Russia and Britain.

Through the Second World War, the United States was perceived as the anti-colonial power. Alas, in the post-World War II era, the U.S.-Iranian relationship suffered two major traumas. At the top of every Iranian’s grievance list is the U.S./British-engineered coup in 1953 against the democratically-elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh, who had led a nationalization of Iran’s oil industries. In his place, we installed the young Shah Reza Pahlavi.

For Americans, the searing national memory was the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the holding of 53 hostages for 444 days. (The latter episode was twice personal for me – as a
young U.S. diplomat and as someone who knew one of the hostages as my student teacher in high school.)

We do not have time to list all of the grievances carefully nurtured by both sides, but I will try to summarize the nuclear dispute, which is bringing us close to war. The Iranians have long held grand (or grandiose) plans for a nuclear power industry, which would also provide the infrastructure for building nuclear weapons. The Shah nonetheless signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (or NPT), under which Iran foreswore development of nuclear weapons – a commitment, which was later reaffirmed by the Islamic Republic and redefined as a religious as well as a legal obligation. As part of the bargain, the NPT also affirms the right of its members to develop peaceful uses of nuclear energy, contingent upon compliance with the safeguards procedures established in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (or IAEA). It is not clear what the Iranian public’s views are on developing nuclear weapons, but there is solid public support for Iran’s nuclear program as the government defines it.

After the first war with Iraq (to liberate Kuwait), the IAEA found that it had underestimated the extent of Iraq’s illicit proliferation activity. The agency subsequently developed a more rigorous regime, called the “Additional Protocol” to provide greater transparency for its members’ nuclear activities. Most members have signed up to this protocol, but Tehran has not. Iran is also not carrying out all requirements of its existing Safeguards Agreements with the IAEA. For example, it has not provided the required advance notice to the IAEA for new construction – most conspicuously and consequentially, with regard to the uranium enrichment facility it had secretly burrowed into a mountain at Fordow. Iran is not permitting timely access to some other nuclear facilities the agency requests to visit, such as the heavy water reactor under construction at Arak, which could be a future source of plutonium for weapons. Also, it has not allowed the agency to adequately investigate suspicious past activities. For these reasons, the IAEA is unable to provide assurances that Iran’s nuclear activities are only peaceful.

So the real issue with Iran is not the right to enrich uranium. The UN Security Council has said that Iran must suspend, not end, enrichment while Iran resolves questions about past activities. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made clear in testimony to Congress that the United States will not oppose Iran’s enrichment of uranium under the right circumstances.

We do not know whether or not Tehran ultimately wants to build and deploy nuclear weapons, but it appears to be determined to build the infrastructure and cadre of experts that would give it the option of doing so. The technical option of building the bomb is available to a number of non-nuclear weapons states – Japan and Germany being conspicuous examples. (Either could build a deliverable nuclear weapons – probably within one year of deciding to do so.) The most important thing for preventing proliferation is to ensure that states do not have the motivation to go nuclear and the ability to take action without being detected. With the physical plant for producing fissile material and the human resources that could pull it off, Iran already has the means ultimately to become a nuclear weapons state. It must be persuaded that such a course is not in its best interests.

The six powers negotiating with Iran – Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States, or the P5+1, are attempting to make that case. Their strategy includes both increasing the costs of non-cooperation through economic and military sanctions and keeping the door open to compromises which would allow Tehran to recognize an outcome as beneficial and one that could be credibly portrayed as beneficial.

The three negotiating sessions in the first half of this year were an important beginning, but they have not yet yielded tangible results. The heads of the respective sides met for a four-hour dinner in Istanbul earlier this week to discuss starting a new round of negotiations. European High Representative Catherine Ashton called the meeting: “useful and constructive.” The Iranian chief negotiator, Saeed Jalili, called it: “positive and fruitful.” These are more upbeat appraisals than heard at the end of the last group session in Moscow, but we must still wait for concrete results.

The crux of the strategy used to achieve the NPT’s nonproliferation objectives is to concentrate on denying states the means to obtain the weapons grade uranium or plutonium needed to construct nuclear weapons. Getting the ingredients for the core of the weapons is generally assessed to be
the most difficult part of nuclear bomb-making. Although vigorous pursuit of activities permitted by the NPT will give states a legs-up, there would still be a long way to go to construct a weapon.

The P5+1 are therefore appropriately focused on halting and reversing Iran’s continuing production of uranium hexafluoride enriched to a U-235 isotope concentration of 20 percent. This is the isotope needed at a 90 percent enrichment level to produce the metallic core of a nuclear warhead. Unfortunately, at 20 percent, the uranium has already travelled 90 percent of the distance required to reach weapons grade. Even though civilian power reactors require only 3.5 percent enrichment, Iran claims it needs the higher level to refuel an ageing research reactor that makes medical isotopes. Large stockpiles of 20 percent enriched uranium thus pose a much more rapid “breakout” option for Iran.

As a confidence building measure, the six powers renewed this year their offer from October 2009 to provide fuel elements for the research reactor. But the updated condition this time is for Iran to stop production of 20 percent enriched, ship the stockpile out of the country, and shut down the Fordow facility. This effort would give each side something it wants – for the six powers, elimination of the most imminent threat; for Iran, tacit acceptance of its right to enrich. But the deal has not yet been clinched. The Iranians also want sanctions relief up front, which the P5+1 cannot give without movement on the compliance issues which prompted the sanctions in the first place. And the six powers want to shut down Fordow, which the Iranians can hardly be expected to do, just because the facility is more difficult for aggressors to destroy.

The U.S. presidential election season is not a propitious time for offering compromises or even apparently for objective discussions of the status quo by the press. Most U.S. commentary on the latest IAEA report, for example, carried alarmist headlines. It did not highlight either the reduction in 20 percent stockpiles during the last quarter or the continuing absence of Iranian progress on advanced centrifuge installations.

My hope is that if we can keep the channel of communications open, maintain P5+1 unity on both sanctions and negotiating initiatives, and avoid distortions leading to war, we will have new opportunities for nonproliferation progress in 2013. With an intelligence community that has improved its analytical tradecraft and an administration that has spoken more honestly to the American people than its predecessor, I think that we will be able to avoid a preventive attack.

- Greg Thielmann
- Iran
- (not categorized)

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/events/2012-09/preventive-war-against-iran-sound-familiar