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Iran's Nuclear Program and Its Implications for International Security

Friedrich Ebert Foundation

Berlin, Germany

May 20, 2010

The nuclear program in Iran has a long history. The Shah was interested in developing a substantial nuclear power capability, which made the nuclear option possible through the reprocessing of spent fuel. The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran was established in 1974 and in 1976 the Shah's government reached agreement with Siemens of Germany to build two reactors at Bushehr near the border with Iraq. This was not controversial in the West as Iran in those years was seen as an ally against the aggressive forces of totalitarian Communism, bent on world domination. Indeed a conservative columnist of the day wrote an article in which he said that U.S. policy was misguided, rather than pursue nonproliferation, the U.S. should pursue controlled proliferation to ensure that the "good guys" got nuclear weapons and the "bad guys" did not. The first two candidates that he recommended to receive nuclear weapons as "good guys" were Iran and Yugoslavia.

After the Islamic Revolution, Ayotallah Khomeini opposed the acquisition of nuclear weapons on religious grounds and thus abandoned the Bushehr reactor project. However, toward the end of the devastating 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, the policy of Iran changed. Germany declined to return to the reactor project after the war and Iran invited Russia to rebuild the two unfinished reactors which had been badly damaged during the war. Thus began a close Russian-Iranian commercial relationship which has continued to the present day. Meanwhile, already by the 1980's A.Q. Khan had been in contact with the Iranian leadership.

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The United States has been concerned about the Iranian nuclear program for many years and has tried innumerable times, with limited success, to reduce Russia's involvement in it. In 1992, Director of Central Intelligence Gates testified to Congress that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons and might acquire them by the year 2000. Iran was attempting to purchase sensitive nuclear technology from Argentina and China; these sales were blocked by the United States as a result of diplomatic approaches to both countries. The Iranian program seemed to slow somewhat during the 1990's and by 1997 the Clinton Administration was predicting that Iran would not be in a position to build a nuclear weapon before 2005. Until the year 2000, the US was relatively uninformed concerning the expanding cooperation between Iran and the A.Q. Khan network. Iran was acquiring centrifuge technology from the Khan network for the purpose of uranium enrichment at its facilities being built Nantanz and not reporting these acquisitions to the International Atomic Energy Agency as required by its NPT Safeguards Agreement.

In 2002, the existence of a heavy water reactor program at Arak, along with the enrichment facilities at Nantanz, were revealed to the world by the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the political arm of the People's Mujahedin known as the MEK. The MEK had been a terrorist organization operating in Iran and was listed as such by the United States for many years. It was expelled from Iran in the 1980's to Iraq where it became a wholly owned subsidiary of Saddam Hussein, Thus, the source was suspect, but the facts apparently were real.

The Natanz facility, construction of which began in 2000, included a pilot enrichment plant, which could house some one thousand centrifuges and a large underground facility eventually intended for perhaps fifty thousand centrifuges, where Iran could enrich on an industrial scale and produce enough highly enriched uranium for in the range of 20 weapons a year or more. The heavy water reactor at Arak, when operating, potentially could produce plutonium sufficient in amount for one to two weapons per year. It is approximately the same size as the North Korean reactor which has fueled that country's nuclear weapon program.

Disclosure of the nuclear facilities led Iran to accept IAEA inspections at Nantanz and Arak and other places. With the increased inspections and Iran's admission of having violated its Safeguards Agreement, Iran also agreed to enter into negotiations with the European Union represented by Britain, France and Germany. The EU sought Iran's agreement to suspend enrichment, which Iran was unwilling to do for more than a relatively brief period. Iran has insisted that its program is peaceful, and that it has an "inalienable right" to peaceful nuclear technology guaranteed by the NPT. Iran took a somewhat harder line in negotiations after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President in 2005. Negotiations were very much on and off again; over time the United States was able to forge a consensus among the UN Permanent Five to pass resolutions sanctioning Iran- one in late 2006 and a second in the spring of 2007. A third was passed in early March of 2008 but those sanctions had little effect. A fourth sanctions resolution has been under negotiation for some time, the new Agreement among Iran, Brazil and Turkey announced on Monday appears designed to result in this new sanctions effort being put aside. However, with the introduction of the new draft fourth sanctions Resolution at the UN Security Council on Tuesday by Secretary Clinton the stage is set for an intense debate at the United Nations. Secretary Clinton said when announcing the new sanctions Resolution it " is as convincing an answer to the efforts undertaken in Teheran over the last few days as any we could provide." And while Iran had seemed from time to time to make efforts during the negotiations to reach a settlement with the EU, it remains adamant that it will not suspend enrichment again.

The United States seemingly has not been willing to offer Iran the same "carrots" (diplomatic relations and guarantees against attack) that it has offered North Korea. Washington may believe that such incentives would not work with the current Iranian leadership. Meanwhile the domestic audience in Iran has become convinced that Iran's nuclear program is essential to Iran's development and a matter of national pride.

In the fall of 2009 an agreement was developed at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) whereby Iran would transfer most of its stocks of low enriched uranium to Russia to be modified to up to about 20 percent enriched suitable for Iran's research

reactor which makes medical isotopes. After enrichment modification the uranium would be transferred to France for fabrication into research reactor fuel and then returned to Iran. This agreement would have significantly reduced Iran's bomb making ability for about a year while fulfilling an Iranian requirement. The Iranian representative agreed to it in Vienna but it was quickly disavowed by Tehran. At this time President Obama's one year negotiating with Iran timeframe has long since expired, stalemate reigns, the Iranians continue to move ahead (albeit with some doubts expressed internationally about the rapidity of progress of the program), and the Israeli's periodically hint at a military option.

Now a new tripartite Agreement has been signed by the Presidents of Iran and Brazil and the Prime Minister of Turkey. It is similar to the IAEA Agreement. Iran would deposit 1200 kg-over half of its current supply-of low enriched uranium (in the 2-4 percent range) in Turkey for "safekeeping" under IAEA Safeguards. In return Iran would receive in one year 120 kg of medical research reactor fuel enriched to 19.75 percent supplied by the "Vienna Group" (US, France, Russia, IAEA). Nothing else will be affected. Iran will continue to enrich, both to 2-4 percent as well as to 19 percent.

Iran asserts that their program is peaceful, that they are only interested in nuclear power but the entire history of their program appears to be largely inconsistent with that assertion. Beginning with the Shah in the 1970's there was an apparent interest in the prestige and power associated with nuclear weapons. When Ayatollah Khomeini disowned an interest in nuclear weapons the Bushehr reactor program was put on the shelf, when Iranian policy changed the reactor project was revived. A.Q. Khan was not known as a promoter of nuclear power, he was selling nuclear weapon capability. Iran had a nearly 20 year clandestine relationship with him and acquired from him centrifuge enrichment technology and possibly the design of a Chinese nuclear weapon- the same one Khan supplied to Libya. Having an enrichment capability to fuel two reactors- we don't see Iran building any more at this time- is one thing. Constructing an industrial scale facility capable of producing material for more than 20 nuclear weapons a year is quite another. And how does a heavy water reactor producing plutonium relate to the electricity grid?

And there are other indicia such as the many links of the nuclear program to the military, as well as constantly changing explanations and the destruction of evidence and

buildings before inspection. The assertion of an “inalienable right” to peaceful nuclear technology is not relevant in this case. The NPT does grant such a right but only to NPT parties in compliance with their NPT nonproliferation obligations. Iran has twice been found by the IAEA to be in violation of NPT related obligations and the Iran case has been referred to and is in the hands of the UN Security Council. So until a nuclear explosive test removes all doubt, or until a settlement satisfactory to all of the negotiating parties positively resolves this issue, one must prudently assume, based on existing evidence, that the Iranian objective is in reality the achievement of nuclear weapons or at least a nuclear weapon technical capability from which status weapons could be quickly produced if desired.

And why might Iran want nuclear weapons? Undoubtedly it would be to increase Iranian influence in the Middle East, that would certainly be a prime objective. Second, Iran likely was impressed that of its two other fellow members of the so-called Axis of Evil Club, the one without nuclear weapons was attacked, the one with such weapons was not. Iran could see a nuclear weapon program as some insurance against a future attack. And third, in some senses perhaps the most important reason, since early in the Cold War the possession of nuclear weapons have distinguished great powers from other states, and this political value of nuclear weapons has not declined since the end of the Cold War despite urgings that nuclear weapons should play a lesser role in the security policies of states. The UN Permanent Five are the five nuclear weapon states authorized by the NPT. British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan said in 1958 that the British program “puts us where we ought to be... in the position of a great power.” President Charles De Gaulle of France said in 1961 that “a great state” that does not possess nuclear weapons when others do “does not command its own destiny.” Prime Minister Vajpayee of India indicated in 1998 after the Indian tests that India now was a truly important country since “We have a big bomb now. India is a nuclear weapon state.” When the Permanent Five met in Paris to fashion a response to the Indian and Pakistani tests, there were reports that Germany and Japan sought to come as well but were told no at some level since they were not nuclear weapon states.

Iran is a proud country, the Persian cultural heritage is one of the richest in world civilization. The Persian Empire was once the world's most powerful. If former provinces and client states of the Empire now have nuclear weapons, why shouldn't Persia, or Iran, itself? The view may be that Iran deserves to be a great power. As President Lula of Brazil put it in his first presidential election campaign, "What Brazil needs is respect and the way one achieves respect in this world is to acquire nuclear weapons."

So what does all this mean for Western Policy? It appears that sanctions may have run their course. They have not been effective, they have not changed Iranian behavior. The new sanctions, assuming their adoption, also seem unlikely to change Iranian behavior although they are certainly worth pursuing. And Russia and China probably will be opposed to further sanctions.

The military option does not seem practical either. Secretary Gates has said that it would only delay the Iranian program for "a few years". Anything more than causing only a temporary delay would seem to require something truly massive, conceivably months of sustained bombing coupled with an invasion by at least Special Forces and perhaps main line military units. This will not happen. And in any case Iranian retaliation would be severe. Probably they would begin with attempts to devastate Gulf State allies of the West with missiles and bomber attacks. And who would know what to expect from Hezbollah?

This being the case, perhaps Western policy should be to try to continue negotiations in the hope that something will come from that someday – I agree that a direct and continuing US-Iran dialogue is overdue – and at the same time pursue policies to slow the Iranian program so as to create more time; time may in fact in this case be a friend. Seventy percent of the Iranian populace is under 30 with no personal experience of the events that began the long-standing hostile impasse. All this being said, however, we all may have to deal with this regime a long time. Thus, it would be wise to begin planning how the West might cope with a nuclear armed Iran.

Some argue that classic cold war deterrence would be the policy to follow. President Clinton said on Larry King's show over a year ago that he didn't worry about Iran using nuclear weapons rather he was concerned about the effect of an Iranian bomb on proliferation in the region and on the NPT. If the Iranians ever used a nuclear weapon against the U.S. or its allies President Clinton said, the day before they did that would be "their very best day".

But there is a problem with deterrence. On the surface, echoing President Clinton and harking back to Cold War experience, it would appear to be a workable policy. But someday, if in fact the Iranians do go all the way to stockpile nuclear weapons, they probably also will develop nuclear capable ballistic missiles that can strike Europe and eventually the United States. For a nuclear umbrella to work it has to be credible. Even during the Cold War doubts were expressed by some as to the reliability of the American deterrent, General de Gaulle is famously said to have asked "Will the Americans risk New York to save Paris?" He obviously thought not, hence the Force de Frappe and thus his was not an idle comment. There was a poll conducted many years ago that concluded that the American people favored going to war to save no other country, including the UK, France, Israel and so on, except for one-Canada-and that was a close vote. So if the Americans were thought by some, with at least some justification, not to be willing to risk New York to save Paris during the Cold War, what would the Saudis think about American willingness to risk New York to save Riyadh now?

So where this leads is where it led De Gaulle- nuclear proliferation, certainly Saudi Arabia and Egypt would want nuclear weapons. Turkey, as a NATO member perhaps not, but would the NPT survive such proliferation? There could be other states in the region as well that would see nuclear weapons as a necessary option under such circumstances. And of course a sophisticated nuclear weapon program already exists in the region.

However, international respectability appears to be important to the government of Iran. If in fact the Iranian program is directed toward nuclear weapons, perhaps even so the government of Iran can be persuaded to stop short of actually building weapons but settle

for a recognized nuclear weapon capability. Iran would have the capability but it might also thereby be able to retain more international respectability. It would not be a good outcome but far safer for everyone than an Iranian nuclear weapon stockpile and it would not necessarily automatically require further nuclear weapon proliferation.

As is obvious, Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons, or even a nuclear weapon capability, will cause many international complications. Since the primary cause of all this is the unremitting hostility of successive Iranian Islamic Republic governments, maybe someday all this will cease, Iran will become more of a country than a cause, and these sorts and calculations need no longer be made. But one thing is certain, this is a problem that will be with us for a long time.