

November 20, 2009

Dealing With Iran's Nuclear Program

It is a commonly held belief by several major countries that Iran intends to build nuclear weapons. Iran denies this and says that its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes. Is there a way out of this tricky and potentially dangerous problem?

There is no hard evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. In the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the U.S. intelligence community said with “high confidence” that Iran ended its nuclear weapons program in 2003. But, the NIE also said it is clear that Iran has the technical and scientific capability to build nuclear weapons and that Teheran could produce enough Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) and plutonium to produce a weapon probably by 2015. If Iran does proceed with building nuclear weapons, an already dangerous situation in the Middle East and South Asia eventually could become deadly.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran has 1359 kilograms of Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) which it would have to convert to HEU in order to build nuclear weapons. The revelation of a secret processing plant just south of the city of Qom—which Teheran acknowledged only after it was discovered by Western intelligence—has heightened concern about Iran's intentions. As a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), building nuclear weapons would violate Iran's commitments under the term of the treaty.

The U.N. has applied some sanctions against Iran and more Western powers are threatening increasingly stiffer sanctions if Teheran does not end its nuclear program. But, these threats have not curbed Iran's nuclear ambitions; rather they have made Teheran even more recalcitrant. Moreover, applying sanctions is very risky because they often do not work and no Iranian leaders—even those favored by the West—would submit to that kind of pressure. A few Western pundits argue for military action, but that almost certainly would lead to wider war, in-

creased terrorism and dramatically reduced oil supplies.

More recently, the so called P5+1 countries (the five permanent members of the security council plus Germany) have proposed that Iran send up to 80 percent of its LEU to Russia and France for reprocessing into fuel for medical treatment facilities. Although the Iranian government has been open to this arrangement, so far a concrete deal has not been negotiated. But, for the first time Iran has been willing to discuss its program and, if successful, this would divert the LEU from weaponization. However, an agreement to send most of the LEU to Russia and France is only a temporary solution, because within a few months Iran could easily resupply itself with enough LEU to potentially convert to weapons grade material.

If we are really interested in controlling nuclear weapons we need to forget about sanctions or military action and assume a two-pronged approach. First, the P5+1 countries need to continue work with Iran to agree to send its LEU out of the country for reprocessing. Second, and most important, the P5+1 countries need to convene an arms control process that will aim to denuclearize the entire region, and not just Iran. Three countries in the region (Israel, India and Pakistan) are not signatories to the NPT. The Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons programs are well known and Israel's possession of nuclear weapons is the worst kept secret in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, the U.S., irrespective of administration, turns a blind and hypocritical eye to these programs. Peace and regional stability will never be accomplished by isolating Iran, but by incorporating Iran into a larger denuclearized context.

—Steven E. Meyer, Professor of Political Science
National Defense University

(The views expressed here are the author's alone.)