

Preventing Iran from Acquiring Nuclear Weapons

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As prepared

I'm very pleased to be here at the Hudson Institute among so many old friends. Today I'd like to speak about Iran, which has concealed a large-scale, covert nuclear weapons program for over eighteen years, and which, therefore, is one of our most fundamental proliferation challenges.

All of Iran's WMD [weapons of mass destruction] efforts -- chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons, and ballistic missiles -- pose grave threats to international security. Iran's pursuit of these deadly weapons, despite its signature on treaties that ban them, marks it as a rogue state, and it will remain so until it completely, verifiably and irreversibly dismantles its WMD-related programs.

In response to recent criticism that the Bush Administration has not been attentive enough to the nuclear threats emanating from Iran, let me just say from the very start of his Administration, the President treated Iran as a serious and growing threat to international security, as evidenced by his famous "Axis of Evil" speech. This Administration was at the forefront of warning the international community about the seriousness of Iran's nuclear weapons program. We have been using every diplomatic tool at our disposal -- working through multilateral channels such as the International Atomic Energy Agency ("IAEA"), the G-8, and with our Russian, Chinese, British, French and German counterparts, and many others -- to apply pressure on Iran to halt its illicit activities.

Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program

Let me start by describing several aspects of Iran's nuclear activities, and why they trouble us so much. There is much we do not know about Iran's weapons program, but much that we do know has been corroborated by a series of IAEA reports over the past year. It is the accumulation of this public and uncontradicted evidence, not just our own sensitive intelligence information, that leads us to our conclusions about Iran's true objectives. To this moment, Iran has never supplied coherent explanations for what it is up to, which is yet another indication that we are watching a clandestine nuclear weapons program in operation.

Iran is pursuing two separate paths to nuclear weapons, one that would use highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons and one that would use plutonium. As to the uranium route, Iran has tried to develop two different uranium-enrichment methods in order to produce weapons-grade uranium. First, it has established a number of facilities for the manufacture and testing of centrifuges (many of which are owned by military industrial organizations), a pilot enrichment facility designed for 1,000 centrifuges, and a large buried facility intended to house up to 50,000 centrifuges. In parallel, Iran has pursued another program to enrich uranium with lasers. Both of

these programs were successfully concealed from IAEA inspectors in Iran for years until an Iranian opposition group disclosed their existence. As IAEA DG ElBaradei's reports confirmed, Iran used both enrichment methods to secretly enrich uranium, enriching to at least 1.2% using centrifuges, and up to 15% using lasers.

Iran has also developed a program for the production of plutonium, an alternate path to nuclear weapons. Covert construction of a large, heavy water production plant was also disclosed by an Iranian opposition group. Its purpose is to supply heavy water for a research reactor that Iran plans to begin constructing this year. The technical characteristics of this heavy water moderated research reactor are optimal for the production of weapons-grade plutonium. Iran claims the purpose of the reactor is for isotope production for civil purposes, a claim that belies Iran's confirmed past interest in building hot cells at the heavy water reactor that appear to be designed for plutonium separation.

Another potential source of plutonium for weapons is the Bushehr light-water power reactor, which is currently under construction. That reactor is under IAEA safeguards. Russia has agreed to provide all fresh fuel for that reactor, and Iran and Russia are discussing an agreement to return all spent fuel to Russia. However, if Iran should withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty ("NPT") and renounce this agreement with Russia, the Bushehr reactor would produce enough plutonium each year for about 30 nuclear weapons.

The potential to produce plutonium is just one of several proliferation concerns with the Bushehr reactor. This large nuclear project provides Iran with access to nuclear technology as well as expertise and training in the construction and operation of nuclear facilities. Bushehr can be used as a cover and a pretext for other sensitive and troublesome nuclear fuel cycle activities. For a variety of reasons, including the lack of agreement with Iran on the return to Russia of the spent fuel containing plutonium, Russia has not yet shipped fuel for initial operation of the Bushehr reactor.

The costly infrastructure to perform all of these activities goes well beyond any conceivable peaceful nuclear program. No comparable oil-rich nation has ever engaged, or would be engaged, in this set of activities -- or would pursue them for nearly two decades behind a continuing cloud of secrecy and lies to IAEA inspectors and the international community -- unless it was dead set on building nuclear weapons.

Cover stories put forward by Iran for the development of a nuclear fuel cycle and for individual facilities are simply not credible. For example, Iran is making an enormous investment in facilities to mine, process, and enrich uranium, and says it needs to make its own reactor fuel because it cannot count on foreign supplies. But for at least the next decade Iran will have at most a single nuclear power reactor. In addition, Iran does not have enough indigenous uranium resources to fuel even one power-generating reactor over its lifetime -- though it has quite enough uranium to make several nuclear bombs. We are being asked to believe that Iran is building uranium enrichment capacity to make fuel for reactors that do not exist from uranium Iran does not have.

Iran would have us believe it is building a massive uranium enrichment facility without having tested centrifuge machines, and building a heavy water production plant with no evident legitimate use for the product. The more credible explanation is that Iran is building the infrastructure to produce highly enriched uranium in centrifuges and plutonium in a heavy-water-moderated reactor.

Finally, there is Iran's claim that it is building massive and expensive nuclear fuel cycle facilities to meet future electricity needs, while preserving oil and gas for export. All of this strains credulity. Iran's uranium reserves are miniscule, accounting for less than one percent of its vast oil reserves and even larger gas reserves. Iran's gas reserves are the second largest in the world, and the industry estimates that Iran flares enough gas annually to generate electricity equivalent to the output of four Bushehr reactors.

Over the past two years, the IAEA has reported many details about Iran's nuclear program that leave no doubt of Iran's nuclear weapons intentions. Consider, for example, the urgency of Iran's push to master centrifuge technology in the face of calls by the international community to suspend enrichment activities. On June 19, 2003, the Chairwoman of the IAEA Board issued a statement of the Board urging Iran not to introduce nuclear material into its centrifuge cascade, pending resolution of the issues that have been raised about Iran's nuclear program. According to subsequent reporting by the IAEA Director General, just six days later, on June 25, Iran introduced uranium hexafluoride into its centrifuge cascade. Iran's stated purpose of producing fuel for nuclear power reactors whose construction has not yet begun -- and which will not be in operation for at least a decade -- hardly justifies this need to press ahead quickly. But this urgency is quite consistent with a desire to produce a nuclear weapon as soon as possible.

Consider also that the IAEA has discovered that Iran has produced Polonium 210 in the Tehran Research Reactor. The IAEA Director General's reports identify two primary uses for Polonium 210: neutron initiators in certain designs of nuclear weapons, and batteries for space satellites. Since Iran has no space satellites or deep space program, the nuclear weapons application is obviously of concern.

Another unmistakable indicator of Iran's intentions is the pattern of repeatedly lying to and providing false reports to the IAEA. For example, Iran denied testing centrifuges with uranium, denied the existence of a laser enrichment program, denied producing enriched uranium, and denied receiving any foreign assistance in its centrifuge program. In each case, Iran confessed the truth only when confronted with irrefutable technical evidence from IAEA inspections. Iran's October 2003 submission to the IAEA, a declaration that was supposed to be the correct, complete, and final story of Iran's nuclear program, omitted any mention of the development and testing of advanced P-2 centrifuges, which IAEA inspectors discovered in early 2004.

Iran's violations of its safeguards agreement with the IAEA include production of plutonium by covertly introducing uranium targets into the Tehran research reactor and reprocessing the irradiated targets to separate the plutonium, and enrichment of uranium with centrifuges and lasers. The IAEA Director General concluded in November 2003 that, "it is clear that Iran has failed in a number of instances over an extended period of time to meet its obligations under its Safeguards Agreement."

There are press reports of Iranian attempts to purchase deuterium, with speculation that this would be used for boosting the yield of nuclear weapons. Such reports underscore how incomplete our information is on the Iranian nuclear program. Why should Iran be seeking deuterium, when as I have said Iran is building a production facility for heavy water, another name for deuterium, to supply its heavy water reactor program? What other roles does deuterium play in the Iranian nuclear program? There are also troubling press reports of Iran's continued interest in procuring sensitive nuclear-related technologies from abroad that could have nuclear weapons applications, like dual-use high speed cameras and spark gaps. We hope the IAEA is investigating such procurement attempts closely and will report on any findings in the upcoming report.

The impetus behind the Iranian quest for nuclear weapons is so great it has caused Iran to renege on its commitments to the IAEA to ratify the Additional Protocol and fully cooperate with inspectors, and renege on its commitment to the Europeans to suspend uranium enrichment activities. If we permit Iran's deception to go on much longer, it will be too late. Iran will have nuclear weapons.

Isolation, Not Engagement

Since an Iranian opposition group provided public information on elements of Iran's nuclear program than had been hidden from the IAEA in August 2002, the IAEA has conducted a series of inspections of Iranian facilities. This has resulted in a series of five reports by the IAEA Director General, all of which are posted on the IAEA web site. These reports document a great deal of information on the Iranian nuclear program, and also make clear there are many remaining unanswered questions, including the true scope and nature of Iran's advanced centrifuge enrichment program, the assistance Iran has received in centrifuge technology and in other areas, the involvement of the military in the centrifuge program and perhaps other aspects of Iran's nuclear efforts, plans for hot cells that can be used for separation of plutonium, and many others. A sixth report of the Director General is expected at the end of August, which is not likely to put these questions to rest.

In response, the IAEA's 35-member Board of Governors has since June 2003 has issued a statement of the Board and adopted four unanimous resolutions expressing increasing concern about the Iranian nuclear program, deploring Iran's failures and insufficient cooperation, and calling on Iran to cooperate fully with the IAEA. The Board has repeatedly called on Iran to suspend all enrichment related activities, something Iran steadfastly refuses to do. Indeed, The most recent resolution in June 2004 "deplores" the fact that "Iran's cooperation has not been as full, timely and proactive as it should have been," reiterates its call for Iran to suspend all enrichment related activities, and specifically calls on Iran to refrain from production of uranium hexafluoride and production of centrifuge components. Iran has made clear it is going forward with the startup of its uranium conversion facility for production of uranium hexafluoride and other materials for the Iranian nuclear program, and going forward with production of centrifuge components and assembly of centrifuges.

Iran's actions and statements do not bode well for the success of a negotiated approach to dealing with this issue. In June, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Assefi renounced a

central part of the deal Iran made last year with Britain, France and Germany to suspend its uranium enrichment programs, saying, "Iran feels itself no longer obliged to its commitments with the European Union trio and will revise its policies on nuclear activities and announce the new decisions within the coming days." And Iranian President Mohamed Khatami declared that Iran was no longer bound by any "moral commitment" to continue suspending uranium enrichment. Iran's decision on July 29 to resume the construction and assembly of nuclear centrifuge parts domestically and remove the seals on material sealed by the IAEA is further cause for alarm

Iran's repudiation of a central element of its deal with the EU-3 is a substantial setback for the European approach, and underlines why we continue to believe that the Iranian nuclear weapons program must be taken up by the UN Security Council, falling as it does within the Council's mandate to address threats to international peace and security.

There is, of course, a real irony here. Much of the pressure on Iran has come not by the international community threatening the use of force against Iran, but merely by the prospect of Iran's nuclear program to be placed on the agenda of the Security Council. Never has the Council been so feared! This is quite an achievement for an Administration frequently criticized as "unilateralist."

Clearly, the time to report this issue to the Security Council is long overdue. To fail to do so would risk sending a signal to would-be proliferators that there are not serious consequences for pursuing secret nuclear weapons programs. As Condoleezza Rice told Fox News two weeks ago, "The Iranians have been trouble for a very long time. And it's one reason that this regime has to be isolated in its bad behavior, not quote-unquote, 'engaged.'"

Our Counterproliferation Strategy

While we work to bring this issue to the UN Security Council, we are simultaneously pursuing other measures to bring a halt to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. We have focused special attention on Russia, the supplier of Iran's Bushehr reactor. Following sustained high-level exchanges, initiated by President Bush, we believe that Russia now shares our concern about Iran's nuclear activities. It joined us in supporting the IAEA's ongoing inspections and backed language in the Sea Island Summit declaration in June deploring Iran's failure to cooperate with the IAEA.

Additionally, Russia recently joined the core group of nations participating in the Proliferation Security Initiative ("PSI"), a robust new tool for counter-proliferation launched one year ago by President Bush. PSI is designed to stop the spread of WMD's, their delivery systems, and related materials to non-state actors and rogue states such as Iran. The overwhelmingly positive response and enhanced awareness that PSI has fostered globally about real, practical steps that can be taken to defeat proliferators is a testament to the importance that countries attach to confronting the challenge of proliferation and developing innovative tools to combat it. The PSI-coordinated interdiction of the ship, BBC CHINA, en route to Libya with equipment for its nuclear weapons program was an important element in the Libyan decision to renounce and dismantle its WMD programs.

In a speech at the National Defense University in February, President Bush addressed weaknesses in the nuclear nonproliferation regime that allowed states like Iran and Libya other states with covert nuclear programs to subvert their NPT obligations. He detailed a number of proposals that made clear the Administration's overarching approach: the frontlines in our nonproliferation strategy must extend beyond the well-known rogue states to the trade routes and entities that are engaged in supplying the countries of greatest proliferation concern. This is a "forward" policy, which can properly be described not as "nonproliferation," but as "counterproliferation." We are employing a number of tools to thwart WMD and missile programs, including sanctions, interdiction, and credible export controls. Most aspiring proliferators are still dependent on outside suppliers and technology. Thus, we can slow down and even stop their weapons development plans by disrupting their procurement efforts.

Conclusion

Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons capability is moving it further and further down the path toward international isolation. We cannot let Iran, a leading sponsor of international terrorism, acquire nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them to Europe, most of central Asia and the Middle East, or beyond. Without serious, concerted, immediate intervention by the international community, Iran will be well on the road to doing so.

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