

## The Emerging US Strategy on Iran's Nuclear Program Containment

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Shortly after President Barack Obama took office, in the first weeks of 2009, the international agenda on Iran seems to have changed dramatically. Despite White House spokesman denials, the new US administration appears to have abandoned the requirement that Iran comply immediately and unconditionally with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions requiring it to suspend all sensitive nuclear activities, namely with respect to uranium enrichment and plutonium. President Obama himself has not made any reference to suspension, nor has he invoked Security Council resolutions, which were the product of more than six and a half years of toil by the Bush administration, gained at snail's pace and with the grudging cooperation of other UNSC partners who had stalled the US-sponsored initiatives on resolutions and incremental sanctions. First the EU, and since 2005 mainly Russia and China, stonewalled the Bush administration's initiatives, objecting to the confrontational and escalatory approach, putatively on the grounds that it was counterproductive. To wit, in his Prague speech on proliferation issues on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, President Obama made no mention of either suspension or of the heretofore salient Security Council resolutions.

Moreover, some observers have indicated that the new US administration has concluded that the requirement for suspension is unrealistic and unattainable. Although President Obama has repeatedly alluded to the need to make sure that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons, that a nuclear armed Iran is "unacceptable", and that Iran must not be allowed "to become a threat" -

as was evidenced in the above mentioned Prague address - he has not, however, stated that Iran must refrain from acquiring enrichment capability, or, that it should abandon the construction of the Arak heavy water reactor, as required by the five unanimously adopted Security Council resolutions of 2006 to 2008 (1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, and 1835). Decision-makers in Washington may have been swayed by Iran's unshaken and determined resolve in the effort to attain an independent enrichment capability for Lightly Enriched Uranium (LEU), and now may be willing to accept it subject to international safeguards and an effective inspection regime to guarantee that there is no diversion of fissile materials to produce weapons grade Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU).

Acceptance of Iran's LEU program would be a major shift in the US view of the Iranian threat: set aside is the view that Iran would inevitably divert LEU, or may use covert facilities, for the ultimate purpose of clandestinely producing weapons-grade materials. Teheran has always accepted the principle of safeguards, and it may be hoped that in the framework of a more comprehensive reconciliation, Iran might comply more strictly with these, as well as ratify the Additional Protocol. Iran's past record of duplicity and gross violation of its NPT and safeguards commitments may now be replaced with an assumption of trust, in the hope that this will encourage *bona fide* full compliance and transparency.

It is still unclear how the new US administration intends to address Iran's plutonium program, given the significant progress in the construction

of the Arak heavy water reactor, and the recent Iranian official launch of the fuel production facility. One plausible avenue is the recognition of Iran's right to enrich uranium in exchange for suspension of its plutonium-related activities. The other is to apply the concept of accepting Iran's right to run a heavy water reactor, subject to a rigid safeguards regime to prevent abuse and diversion of materials or reprocessing to weapons grade materials.

Some issues mentioned by speakers at the Ninth Herzliya Conference in February 2009 remain unresolved. One is that of Iran's acquisition of fissile materials by channels other than the Natanz enrichment facility and the Arak reactor, at unknown secret sites or by possible illicit acquisition of fissile materials in the black market, though in both cases there abounds uncertainty about the sources of the information.

Some have likened the envisaged status of Iran to that of Japan, as a nuclear threshold state, that maintains the capability to produce nuclear weapons but refrains from doing so. But that analogy is not entirely valid: as described by Dr. Bruno Tertrais at the Ninth Herzliya Conference, Japan never had a covert clandestine program, or secretly conducted design work on a nuclear bomb, or a nuclear warhead for a ballistic missile, as has Iran. Tertrais also commented that no country has ever come as close to the nuclear threshold as Iran without crossing it; the temptation is just too great, he says, after the massive investment of time and resources.

### Back to Future: the Revival of Containment?

Since the beginning of 2009, the Obama administration has removed Iran from the top of the administration's agenda in favor of the three areas in which the new administration has decided to invest the greatest part of its effort, including a large measure of the President's personal resolve: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the economy. Iranian

cooperation in all three of these – particularly the first two – would be welcomed by the administration in the attempt to guarantee success in the complicated, risky, and volatile moves that the administration is planning in the months and year or two to come. Particularly in Iraq, Iran's contribution to stability is crucial to facilitating the

withdrawal of US forces in an orderly fashion, according to the prescribed timetable; instability in Iraq could undermine the success of the envisaged policy. Regarding efforts to resuscitate the US economy, regional instability in the Middle East could potentially induce a resurgence of energy costs. This would impact negatively on the

envisioned economic recovery measures or, in an extreme scenario, even entirely undermine them. In fact, it may be argued that the President has invested most of his energies and his reputation in the success of these three, having been elected primarily due to the perceived failures of the Republican handling of Iraq and the economy.

The strategy adopted by the Bush administration, which deliberately sought escalation, believing that this was the only way to convince Teheran to abandon enrichment, as well as to justify incrementally severe measures should Iran not comply with international demands, is now openly abandoned. The appointees in the centers of power in Washington may well believe that the previous strategy was hopelessly counterproductive. Therefore, the correct strategy

is now believed to be "containment", a term that has gained tremendous credit over the past year as the issue has been at the forefront of public debate. In this sense, "rollback" is perceived as out of the question; and a revival of the Cold War concept of "containment" is in order.

According to this approach, it would now seem to be best:

- to "contain" Iran's LEU program so that it does not exceed designated boundaries, and that no HEU, or weapons grade material of any other kind either, is produced clandestinely;
- to "contain" Iran's other offensive activities in the region, such as support for actions that undermine the status-quo with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, the Gulf States and perhaps Gaza and the West Bank;

- to "contain" the threat of collapse of regional non-proliferation firebreaks, i.e. to ensure that Iran's acquisition of nuclear capabilities within the designated limitations does not fuel the nuclear ambitions of other regional parties (particularly with respect to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, as well as other potential nuclear breakouts like Libya and Algeria, which already possess a record in this regard).

Backing up containment, is a complementary belief in deterrence. If in the end worst comes to worst, deterrence may serve as a further incentive for Iran to desist from actually acquiring nuclear weapons, and *in extremis* from actually using them if they are acquired nevertheless.

## On the Relevance of Deterrence

Nuclear deterrence is seen by prominent US personalities associated with the new administration as having an unshakably proven record of inducing stability in international conflict over the past six decades. The success of deterrence in the Cold War is often invoked to demonstrate that a nuclear-armed Iran is perhaps undesirable, but not intolerable. The heated skepticism previously directed towards deterrence in the post-Cold War era ("the Second Nuclear Age"), expressed by conservative critics who were closely associated with the period of the neo-conservative revival and regency, is generally dismissed by most Democratic and middle-of-the-road observers, including leading former and current decision-makers. The conservative critics' central theme was that deterrence may be unreliable, unless optimized through additional efforts and measures. The argument was that adversary decision-makers are inevitably prone to err or miscalculate for a multiplicity of reasons rooted in their cultural surroundings and human shortcomings. Most scholars of deterrence anyhow never accepted the validity of the critique. It has now once again been thoroughly sidelined in favor of the rational-actor model that always depicted decision-makers as ultimately cautious and calculating in nuclear affairs.

Nuclear deterrence *in extremis* is once again believed to be very near to carrying an iron-clad degree of success, and the margin of potential error is regarded as almost insignificant for policy-making. What this means is that the probability of deterrence succeeding when directed at states (terrorist networks aside), is now viewed in a much higher percentage bracket, and thus the

risk has moved to within acceptable boundaries, in a remarkable shift from prior perceptions. Even Iran's widely admitted eccentric leadership is believed to conform to assumptions about the rationality of interest-driven decision-making in nuclear affairs, and the dangers of miscalculation are assessed, by implication, to be remote and marginal. The persistent view still held by a tiny minority that the current leadership group in Iran may be driven by messianic prophecies, apocalyptically inclined or willfully suicidal – is now entirely dismissed, often as an absurd attempt at manipulation.

It is recognized that the ongoing Iranian Shiite Islamic Revolution is religiously and therefore ideologically commanded to struggle against the West and to undermine the status-quo, even at great sacrifice, and that this is "in its DNA". In this sense, a nuclear-armed Iran would be destabilizing even if deterrence is effective, and this is another reason that every effort should be made to prevent Teheran from acquiring the capability. Still, it is believed that even given its radical agenda, the Islamic Republic is, nonetheless, driven by interests, and these can and should be focused upon in order for "containment" and deterrence to be effective.

The Obama administration has indicated that if the currently envisaged process of engaging Iran fails, it will resort to increasing sanctions pressure. This scenario is unlikely to develop quickly, because Teheran has space to maneuver and draw out the negotiations, as it has done very effectively in the past, during negotiations with European and other parties. Moreover, most observers doubt that sanctions could have

sufficient impact to convince the Islamic Republic leadership to reverse its nuclear course. Certainly it is believed that sanctions require time to work, and that the time necessary is no longer available.

The record of sanctions in previous cases of nuclear proliferation is mixed and unpromising. Some states may have stopped short of producing nuclear weapons because of international pressure. But virtually all of the *de facto* nuclear weapons states in the past moved ahead with their programs while facing various international sanctions and embargo regimes, and in spite of economic hardship (it is patently wrong to claim that South Africa was restrained from acquiring nuclear weapons by sanctions: in fact, South Africa produced nuclear weapons while under severe sanctions, and it was only when regime change occurred that the white minority government decided to refrain from transferring nuclear capabilities to the black majority that it did not trust with them). India and Pakistan both expanded their nuclear capabilities significantly while under sanctions, and the most clear-cut current case is North Korea.

Therefore, sanctions may be an accepted normative form of increasing pressure, but they may also be a cognitive dissonance escape route from the need to confront harsher choices: military prevention, on the one hand, or, on the other, acquiescence in the object state's acquisition of nuclear weapons, and the need to move to containment and deterrence, controversial and volatile as these may be.

Another element that has gained greater attention in Washington is the potential threat of nuclear terrorism. In this connection, a heightened sense

of alarm appears to be directed at the safety of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal and infrastructure. This was perhaps predictable, because of the confidence with which leading US Democratic party personalities, including both former and current office holders, tend to rely on the effectiveness of deterrence when directed at states, such as Iran, or North Korea, while

terrorist organizations are assessed to have no tangible assets to hold hostage in the service of deterrence; so it is only natural for nuclear terrorism to gain in relative overall concern. The new administration has expressed concern in this connection, the radical Islamic penetration of the Pakistani security community in the immediate timeframe being obviously disturbing, and there is

also a general discomfort with the state of the long-term prospects for the cohesion and viability of the Pakistani state as we have known it up to now. In the background lurk academic studies that indicate a 50 percent probability of a major nuclear terrorist attack against a major Western city occurring sometime in the next 20 years.

## Towards a Grand Bargain?

The Obama administration appears to be creating deliberate linkage between the chances of success of its policies on Iran, and Israel's actions on several issues. Some have gone so far as to state unequivocally that the Bush administration's blanket support of Israel damaged US interests on Iran, as well as other Moslem theaters, or even undermined the prospects for success. Since February, leading observers harboring deep misgivings about the results of the Bush administration policies toward the Iran crisis have vociferously contributed to the debate. The testimonies given to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft demonstrated the bipartisan consensus prevailing about the need for a fresh US-led international approach towards Iran, through avoiding inflammatory and escalatory remarks or threats. Brzezinski went so far as to warn that "we should not become susceptible to advice by interested parties", meaning Israel, which might influence, or impede, this fresh US approach. They hold that Iran should be co-opted into understanding the advantages of responding favorably to the Obama administration's approach. It should be noted that remarks made by Secretary of Defense Gates regarding the preference for sanctions to back up engagement would appear to contradict the administration's approach, and that Vice President Biden has emphasized that a nuclear-armed Iran is intolerable.

Comments by the UK's Foreign Secretary David Miliband highlighted the fact that leading members of the international community have understood the Obama administration's message on Iran: there should be no talk of increased sanctions pressure on Iran, plausibly because the approach now is conciliatory rather than escalatory or inflammatory, those now branded counterproductive.

At the Ninth Herzliya Conference, a substantial portion of the debate was devoted to other international arms control issues, including the prospects for the "zero option" recently revived by the initiative of the "Gang of Four" (Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn), and the prospects for

implementation of Article VI of the NPT calling for general nuclear disarmament by all. The conclusion was that in the near term there will be no breakthrough on these in a way that it might resonate sufficiently to solve the problem of further nuclear proliferation in the years ahead, such as by nuclear aspirants Iran and North Korea. Russia, China and India were noted to all be expanding and modernizing their arsenals, and it was assessed that the chances of all the nuclear states going to zero soon – were nil. More optimism was generated by the prospect of further reductions of US and Russian stockpiles, and by the Obama administration's commitment to reduce tensions with Russia and preparedness to go to lower strategic levels, albeit this would be, so it is believed, conditional on the resolution of outstanding issues that still require addressing, such as Georgia, BMD deployment in Poland and the Czech Republic, and tactical nuclear stockpiles.

Time will be the judge of whether or not the new approach on Iran will turn out to have been the right, or "smart" one, or, a naïve blunder into escalation and disaster driven by misjudgment of the forces at work on the issues at hand. Undoubtedly, the new approach will be optimized by Iran, regardless of the results of the forthcoming elections in June, to gain time to expedite and upgrade its sensitive nuclear activities to new levels, and to thus increase the unlikelihood and difficulty of reversing them. An extensive LEU program expanded with international approval and under strict safeguards would be an achievement for Iran, as would the operation of the large heavy water reactor at Arak subject to safeguards to prevent reprocessing. In both, this would put Iran a hat-drop away from acquiring a significant nuclear weapons arsenal at very short notice.

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