

The Continuing Duel with Iran: Containment, Deterrence, and the Iranian Arms Control Agreement

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The time may come when negotiation and diplomacy can end the duel between Iran and the United States and its Arab allies. That time has not come, and it will not come soon -- even if Iran does sign a nuclear agreement with the P5+1. There are far too many other areas of tension -- both because of Iran's ambitions and because of its fears, past, and need for deterrence and defense.

In brief, they include:

- Iran's expansion of influence into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and its support of Shi'ite movements in countries like Bahrain.
- Iran's growing missile forces.
- Iran's build up of asymmetric naval, air, and missile forces to pose a threat to naval traffic and petroleum exports in the Gulf and nearby waters in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean.
- Iran's ideological, religious, and military threat to Israel.
- Tensions between Iran and Pakistan.
- The need of Iran's regime to demonize the United States for its own internal political purposes.
- The weaknesses in Iran's conventional forces, and its aging and battle-worn air, surface-to-air missile, larger naval surface ship, and land force equipment.
- The steady build up of Arab Gulf air and naval power, superior air defense capability, and ballistic missile defense capability.
- The rising tension between Sunni and Shi'ite within Islam.
- Iran's history of isolation and suffering during the Iran-Iraq War, and the lack of outside reaction to Iraq's use of chemical weapons.
- The fact that Israel, Pakistan, and the United States do have advanced nuclear capabilities.

At Best, A Deeply Divided Iranian Leadership

Iran's current power structure may have its "moderates" in the sense they are willing to negotiate with the United States and Gulf Arabs, see putting an end to sanctions as more important than progress in acquiring nuclear weapons, and see the collective threat of violent extremist movements like ISIL and the need for stability in the Middle East and the Gulf as a reason for compromise and to reduce tension with the United States and Iran's Arab neighbors.

These "moderates" may include -- at least to some degree -- figures like President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif. But the fact that Iran has skilled and well-educated political figures and diplomats who know how to talk to the West does not mean that they are willing to compromise on U.S. terms, that they say what they think, or what they say reflects their true motives. Taqiya -- the right to dissemble or lie to defend the faith -- is an all too familiar part of Iran's Shi'ite past.

No one is allowed to run for office in Iran – or represent it in either officially or in semi-official “dual track” diplomacy -- who is not approved by the Supreme Leader and those around him.

Over the last two weeks, Iran’s Supreme Leader has made it all too clear that he resists key aspects of what the United States and other members of the P5+1 have seen as essential elements of a valid nuclear agreement. It seems equally clear that he will only accept such an agreement if – as was the case with the Ayatollah Khomeini at the end of the Iran-Iraq War – he feels compelled to swallow the bitter poison of compromise out of sheer necessity.

Many of the Supreme Leader’s senior supporters have shown that same level of opposition. Key leaders in Iran’s security apparatus and Islamic Revolutionary Guard have come close to saying that Iran’s negotiators are traitors.

Growing Tensions with the Arab World

Moreover, Iran’s opposition to compromise is now driven by more than the traditional hostility of the regime to the United States as the Great Satan, and to Israel as the lesser Satan. Most of Arab states may oppose the rise of ISIL and other extremist movements like the Al Nusra Front, as much as they do Iran. However, they have come increasingly hostile to Iran’s growing influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has become the leader of the Arab Gulf states in a growing effort to limit and counter Iran’s influence, and the largely Sunni Arab states have no more tolerance for Iran’s Shi’ite Islam revolution than Iran has for them. In practice, the tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors have risen steadily at the same time that the P5+1 negotiations have taken place.

So have Arab fears the United States will somehow turn away from them and ally itself to Iran – or more rationally – that the United States will use a nuclear agreement and U.S. rising oil and gas production to reduce its security commitments to the Arab states. In fact, one of the major security aspects of any agreement that is reached is that the Obama Administration will have to do at least as much to reassure its Arab allies as Israel and a third “foreign” structure: The U.S. Congress.

A Continuing Duel over Nuclear Weapons Capability – *Without* an Agreement

It is far from clear that the P5+1 and Iran will be able to agree on a final agreement, see it accepted, and begin to actually implement one. However, some critical aspects of U.S. and allied security interests in the Middle East are clear that need to be considered in evaluating either any agreement or the failure to reach one, and that go far beyond the current emphasis on Iran’s fuel cycle and nuclear breakout capability.

If the negotiations fail to the point of an open break -- rather than drag on in the form of further negotiations and Iranian compliance with the present agreement – the resulting failure will make all of the current tensions far worse. It not only will open Iran up to the option of new efforts to develop nuclear weapons, and creating new concealed or covert programs and facilities, it is almost certain that Iran will increase all of its other military and security efforts.

Any such end to the talks will again raise the issue of Israeli or U.S. preventive strikes. It is almost certain to lead to added U.S. and Arab military build-up and arms race will best provide containment, and new forms of U.S. and Arab allied deterrence. The United States may have to provide some form of extended nuclear deterrence. Arab states may start to actively seek their own nuclear weapons. Israel will have to seek a decisive nuclear advantage over Iran, and have to upgrade its forces.

A Continuing Duel over Nuclear Weapons Capability – *With* an Agreement

If Iran and the P5+1 do reach an agreement, there will still be an going duel between Iran and the United States and Arab states – one that may or may not be less intense than having no agreement.

Any serious arms control agreement tends to become war by other means: a struggle to exploit the agreement to one’s own advantage at the expense of other states. This is particularly true when one party has effectively been forced into compliance, rather than sought an agreement it sees as one of mutual benefit.

Iran is not negotiating because it has become moderate or sees a nuclear agreement as bringing peace and stability. It is negotiating because of the pressure of sanctions, the threat to its economy, the limits enforced on its other national security efforts -- and to some extent its fear of triggering some form of military option, a formal U.S. commitment to extended deterrence, and/or proliferation on the part of its Arab neighbors and Turkey.

Iran also faces a massive U.S. advantage in power projection and conventional warfare capability, and steadily increasing Gulf Arab superiority in conventional air and naval power. Its build up of asymmetric forces presents the problem that outside powers can escalate to doing far more damage to Iran than Iran can do to them, and its conventionally armed missiles lack the accuracy and lethality to deter or retaliate with anything like the same level of damage.

Iran's ambitions to be a major regional power, its fears of outside powers and its need to defend and deter, will push Iran to do as much as it can to find ways to improve its capability to acquire nuclear weapons. Even if Iran does decide its economy and ability to fund its other military and regional efforts are more important than its present nuclear efforts, it will still have every possible incentive to retain and improve the remaining elements of the nuclear weapons program it had through at least 2003, and which recent IAEA reports and its activities at Parchin indicate have continued in some form.

This may or may not lead Iran to clearly violate an agreement, but it does seem likely to at least push it to the margin. As a result, much depends on what the details of any agreement actually turn out to be.

Exploiting Past Iranian Missile and Nuclear Efforts Without Disclosure

The P5+1 already seems to have waived any effort to link a nuclear agreement to Iran's long-range missile programs -- which may include cooperation with the DPRK in developing medium range, intermediate range, or even an intercontinental ballistic missile. There will be no limits on its ability to pursue any form of missile, even though the IAEA has warned that there may have been a serious Iranian effort to obtain design data on a nuclear-armed missile warhead.

It now seems equally likely that if an agreement is reached, the agreement will not force Iran to disclose its past weapons related issues. It will not have to respond to the descriptions of the "Possible Military Dimensions" of Iran's nuclear programs that IAEA reports have raised in detail ever since 2011.

The U.S. State Department has already indicated this will be the case, in spite of the fact the IAEA's May 29th report warns that:

- Previous reports by the Director General have identified outstanding issues related to possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program and actions required of Iran to resolve these. The Agency remains concerned about the possible existence in Iran of undisclosed nuclear-related activities involving military related organizations, including activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile. Iran is required to cooperate fully with the Agency on all outstanding issues, particularly those which give rise to concerns about the possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program, including by providing access without delay to all sites, equipment, persons and documents requested by the Agency.
- The Annex to the Director General's November 2011 report (GOV/2011/65) provided a detailed analysis of the information available to the Agency at that time, indicating that Iran has carried out activities that are relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device. This information is assessed by the Agency to be, overall, credible. The Agency has obtained more information since November 2011 that has further corroborated the analysis contained in that Annex.
- In February 2012, Iran dismissed the Agency's concerns, largely on the grounds that Iran considered them to be based on unfounded allegations, and in August 2014, Iran stated that "most of the issues" in the Annex to GOV/2011/65 were "mere allegations and do not merit consideration".
- As indicated...in the Framework for Cooperation, the Agency and Iran agreed to cooperate further with respect to verification activities to be undertaken by the Agency to resolve all present and past issues.
- As also indicated...since the Director General's previous report, Iranian and Agency officials have held further

discussions on the two practical measures agreed in May 2014 in the third step of the Framework for Cooperation that remained to be implemented. Iran shared some information in relation to one of these measures. The Agency and Iran agreed to continue the dialogue on these practical measures and to meet again in the near future.

- Since the Director General's previous report, at a particular location at the Parchin site, the Agency has continued to observe, through satellite imagery, the presence of vehicles, equipment and probable construction materials, but no further external changes to the buildings on the site. As previously reported, the activities that have taken place at this location since February 2012 are likely to have undermined the Agency's ability to conduct effective verification. It remains important for Iran to provide answers to the Agency's questions⁷¹ and access to the particular location at the Parchin site.
- ...Contrary to the relevant resolutions of the Board of Governors and the Security Council, Iran is not implementing its Additional Protocol. The Agency will not be in a position to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran unless and until Iran provides the necessary cooperation with the Agency, including by implementing its Additional Protocol.

Diverting Increased Export Revenues

The lifting of sanctions will give Iran more resources as well as ease any domestic political pressures on the regime. Depending on the terms of the actual agreement, Iran will acquire a substantial increase in export funds. This will give it the flexibility to fund covert nuclear programs, other military and covert security programs, or civil needs. At least to date, there is no indication that an agreement will provide any added transparency in these areas, and the present level of transparency in the financing of Iran's national security programs is limited to negligible.

A Nuclear Shell Game

Iran can return to two options it has exploited in the past: manipulating enrichment levels and building new covert facilities.

As the IAEA's May 29th report notes, Iran has already increased its supply of low enriched uranium (LEU) under the terms of the agreement. It can stockpile LEU for future weapons production under the guise of providing fuel for new reactors, or find many other excuse and reasons to play a nuclear shell game in terms of added amounts of LEU, or covert stockpiles of higher enrichment levels.

New Secret or Covert Facilities

Iran may again attempt to create secret and undeclared facilities to produce fissile material: A covert heavy water reactor, laser isotope separation, or a far smaller and easier to conceal centrifuge facility(ies) using more advanced versions of the centrifuge.

The IAEA's May 29th report notes that:

R&D area: Since the Director General's previous report, Iran has been intermittently feeding natural UF₆ into IR-1, IR-2m, IR-4, IR-6 and IR-6s centrifuges, sometimes into single machines and sometimes into cascades of various sizes. The Agency has verified that one IR-5 centrifuge and one prototype IR-8 centrifuge are in place but without connections.

The IAEA report notes that Iran existing base of declared facilities is far broader than the narrow target base of its power reactor at Bushehr, centrifuge facilities at Natanz and Fordow, and heavy water reactor at Arak: the declared facilities include, "18 nuclear facilities and nine locations outside facilities where nuclear material is customarily used."

Tehran:

1. Tehran Research Reactor (TRR)
2. Molybdenum, Iodine and Xenon Radioisotope Production (MIX) Facility
3. Jabr Ibn Hayan Multipurpose Laboratories (JHL)

Esfahan:

4. Miniature Neutron Source Reactor (MNSR)
5. Light Water Sub-Critical Reactor (LWSCR)

6. Heavy Water Zero Power Reactor (HWZPR)
7. Uranium Conversion Facility (UCF)
8. Fuel Manufacturing Plant (FMP)
9. Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant (FPFP)
10. Enriched UO₂ Powder Plant (EUPP)

Natanz:

11. Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP)
12. Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant (PFEP)

Fordow:

13. Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP)

Arak:

14. Iran Nuclear Research Reactor (IR-40 Reactor)

Karaj:

15. Karaj Waste Storage

Bushehr:

16. Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP)

Darkhovin:

17. 360 MW Nuclear Power Plant

Shiraz:

18. 10 MW Fars Research Reactor (FRR)

LOFs: Nine (all situated within hospitals)

There have already been reports from Iranian opposition groups that Iran has covert facilities that should be added to this list. Such reports are controversial, but Iran does have a long history of only declaring the facilities it is actually caught building or using. Iran has also sheltered such facilities in mountains like Fordow, or underground at places like Natanz – where some reports indicate a massive ceiling thickness designed to protect against conventional earth penetrators.

Other Covert or Concealable Options if an Agreement is Reached

These, however, are only a few of the options open to Iran in the duel to come – agreement or no agreement. With or without an agreement, Iran may pursue some combination of the following permitted or concealable activities:

- Pursue missile development and aircraft procurement programs to create more effective delivery platforms. Testing dummy and high explosive warheads simulating the characteristics of a given nuclear weapons design.
- Substitute precision guided, conventionally-armed ballistic or cruise missiles to effectively substitute “weapons of mass effectiveness” for “weapons of mass destruction.”
- Turn to biological and chemical weapons.
- Create a tailored dual-use series of R&D programs in areas important to weapons development.
- Obtain dual use technology and equipment to aid in weapons development and production.
- Create contingency infrastructure and deployment plans for creating nuclear forces.
- Work in cooperation with a nuclear and missile power like the DPRK to obtain nuclear weapons and missile design, manufacturing, and test data.
- Create a less visible and more passive facility than Parchin to simulate a nuclear weapons test using advanced test equipment and material like non-fissile Uranium to actually measure key aspects of the performance of a weapons design.
- Pursue various aspects of developing and manufacturing a boosted/and or fissile weapon, or smaller weapons design for tactical or covert attack purposes.
- Develop a manufacturing base for key weapons components under the guise of a peaceful use.
- Carry hydrodynamics and other critical research as a compartmented activity described as peaceful.
- Covertly prepare a nuclear device test as a weapons or fissile event.

- Prepare for an underground test, by preparing a test site, converting a mine. Etc.
- Covertly carry out and deny a very low yield test, or test with sub-critical fissile material.

No Official Base for Assessing these Risks or Options

These risks do not mean that the United States and P5+1 should not sign an agreement. The issue is not whether the agreement is perfect, but whether it is better or worse than no agreement. It is not whether Iran can get one nuclear device, it is rather whether Iran can create an effective nuclear force.

At the same time, it is critical to note that the U.S. government has not provided any analysis to date of Iran's options for cheating or avoiding the terms of any agreement by using permitted or unaddressed technologies and military options. The United States never updated its past unclassified estimates of Iran's progress in nuclear weapons design and production – although the IAEA says it has received more data since 2011 on possible weapons related activities.

This makes it impossible to estimate how long it would take Iran to go from getting the amount of fissile material it needs for a test or weapon to creating an actual weapon – which may be far longer than the time need to simply get enough fissile material.

There is no way to estimate whether Iran could or would build a weapon without an actual fissile test or weapons test. There is no way to estimate the size of the fissile stockpile it would need to deploy a meaningful force, or its ability to integrate a given missile with a given type of nuclear warhead.

It is also important to note that a meaningful estimate of the answers to these questions would require require the IAEA to be able to resolve all of the possible uncertainties it has raised relating to “Possible Military Dimensions” since 2011.

As noted earlier, the Obama Administration has evidently decided that Iran's failure to is an acceptable risk, but so far has never provided anything like meaningful transparency as to its confidence in its knowledge of Iran's future ability to weapons and deploy them. Accordingly, it is going to take a great deal more than spin and rhetoric to explain and justify an agreement if one is reached. It is going to take any equal amount of effort to explain its overall strategy for a post agreement security structure in the Middle East, or its overall strategy if the negotiations clearly fail.

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