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The Enduring Threat: A Brief History

Iranian Nuclear Ambitions and American Foreign Policy

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The resumption in August of uranium processing, directed by newly elected Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has not only aggravated enduring tenuous American foreign relations with Iran that have existed since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, but additionally this provocative action directed by President Ahmadinejad escalated political tensions amongst the United States and the EU-3 which are major importers of Iranian petroleum.

President Ahmadinejad continually asserts in his nation's defense that Iran has an "inalienable right" to a civilian nuclear program, in order to provide for domestic energy self-reliance principally with the ever-omnipresent international energy supply deficit. This deficit has been projected to only exacerbate as China and India increase their domestic energy consumption during this widely cited period of a net global deficit for energy supplies. Thus, based on continually declining international petroleum supplies and ever-increasing international demand as stated by the International Energy Agency (IEA), a methodologically strong case can be presented supporting the Iranian right under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to pursue a civilian nuclear energy program in order to sustain domestic economic growth and energy self-sufficiency in a dynamic international energy market.

Iran has adamantly maintained their sovereign right to develop a civilian nuclear program to eventually replace its dependence on finite petroleum reserves which are being depleted daily due to decreased international supply and increasing international demand especially from Russia and China. Thus, unsurprisingly China and Russia along with the EU-3 have continually pushed for international negotiation with Iran and increased cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) in a move to prevent the referral of Iran to the United Nations Security Council which ultimately would endanger the diplomatic and

economic interests of all nations.

Economically, the European Union is the main trading partner of Iran regarding both imports and exports. The decision by the United States to ban American oil companies from investing in the Iranian energy infrastructure since 1995 has allowed European companies to generate economical development and fiscal gains from investing and trading with the world's second largest oil-producing nation. In an ever-growing energy dependent world with international demand increasing and global supplies decreasing, this favorable relationship of petroleum access exclusivity and privilege, if maintained, will provide economic and political gains into the future.

This favorable dialogue concerning trade highlights a categorical difference between American and European foreign policies concerning Iran. The American harsh stand reflects a longstanding mutual suspicion that has characterized relations between Washington and Tehran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Diplomatic relations between the two nations have been severed since American diplomats were held hostage and the American Embassy in Tehran overthrown in 1979. Like the United States, most European countries had hostile relations with Tehran following the Revolution in response to the revolutionary government's extremist domestic and foreign policies. However, European relations have gradually warmed and European and Iranian officials have successfully strengthened their common stands on several issues, particularly trade, terrorism and the War in Iraq.

Since the January 2002, State of the Union Speech by President Bush, American foreign policy, has seemingly declared that Iran is not pursuing their nuclear program in a transparent manner or strictly for civilian purposes. Rather, it has been posited that Tehran is trying to acquire nuclear capabilities for national defense which could cause a geo-political conflict between Tehran and its neighbors including Israel. Iranian strategists in America, feel that Iran is threatened by the growing non-conventional capabilities of several of their neighbors, as well as the deployment of American troops next to their borders in almost all directions. However, this argument is not fully encountering the religio-political landscape of Iran and thus it must be explicitly posited that due to religio-cultural beliefs, Tehran is not pursuing a nuclear proliferation project. Fundamental Islamic religious and jurisprudential beliefs consider all weapons of mass destruction as immoral and negating the divine sovereignty of the divine. Hence, to counter increased geo-political strife and national security threats, Iran is increasing development and deployment of conventional weapons systems.

The controversial issue of Iranian ambitions for a civilian nuclear energy project ironically began with the assistance of the United States during the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlevi. In 1957, Iran signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States as part of the United States Atoms for Peace

Program. Additionally, under this program Iran purchased a research nuclear reactor from the United States that was put into operation in 1967.

Thus, these recent Iranian aspirations for nuclear weapons as purported by American policy makers are not a recent occurrence; the Shah in 1974 established the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and stated that Iran would have nuclear weapons without a doubt very soon. This pursuit of nuclear aspirations both for civilian power and regional military deterrence of Egypt and Iraq began before Israel was considered as a target, as is widely purported today; in fact during this period prior to the 1979 Revolution in which the Arab coalition had an oil embargo in place, Iran was an implicit supplier of petroleum products to Israel.

In addition to the financial and technological assistance from the United States, France and Germany signed several agreements with the Shah to provide Iran with enriched uranium, nuclear reactors and research centers. However, following the 1979 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini immediately suspended construction indefinitely at all nuclear facilities in the "Islamic State" because as aforementioned, fundamental Islamic religious and jurisprudential beliefs consider all weapons of mass destruction as immoral.

Even during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran never explicitly announced a decision to pursue proliferation of weapons of mass destruction albeit their neighbor to the West, Iraq, was offered arms and military guidance from the United States and its Cold War allies. Throughout this period of internal institutional change and external military engagement with Iraq, Iran never resorted to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction even though Saddam Hussein, a secular dictator in control of a nation with a Muslim majority, began to produce and amass a stockpile of lethal nerve agents such as Sarin and VX nerve gas and other unconventional weapons which he would later use on his own populace in the first Gulf War.

Additionally, it has been widely reported in intelligence circles but never truly confirmed, that Israel has a nuclear program in place for defensive military purposes which was assembled hastily with American and Norwegian support during the Six-Day War against the Arab coalition. Thus, despite these aforementioned geopolitical threats throughout the Cold War and the collapse of Arab nationalism which were great periods of instability in the region, Tehran never restarted their nuclear program which was originally started by the Shah nor resorted to proliferation of non-conventional weapons.

In addition, all of these events occurred during a theocratic regime that was led by Ayatollah Khomeini which was regarded by the United States as extremist and fanatic. We do not need to allude to the United States opinion of Iraq during this period as it is widely well-known by most policy makers and citizens alike since the American War on Terror. However, we can briefly state that the American

opinion of Iraq and Saddam Hussein was favorable while the opinion of Iran was adversely negative.

These facts cannot be negated nor neglected because Tehran during a longer period of geopolitical instability and internal change did not resort to non-conventional weapons proliferation (including a nuclear arms program) but rather strictly abided by Islamic sharia which as previously cited by Ayatollah Khomeini considers all weapons of mass destruction as immoral. Why then would Iran in the contemporary landscape which is relatively geo-politically less hostile and with the election of a relatively more Pro-Western government pursue the proliferation of nuclear weapons? However, in the aftermath of the war, Tehran sought to revive its civilian nuclear program, particularly the completion of construction of a nuclear power plant in the southern city of Bushehr originally started by the Germans during the Shah's regime. Yet, the threat of United States sanctions on any potential external partner prevented Iran from immediately beginning construction.

This implicit policy remained intact until 1995, when Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov secured a contract with Iran to complete the construction of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr and supply the reactor with fuel, if Iran agreed to the safeguard monitoring and protocols of the IAEA. This agreement during that period was thus considered to be an amicable resolution to all parties.

We cannot deny that Moscow had many internal economic interests in mind throughout the contractual negotiations with Tehran but we must also recall that for an agreement of this magnitude (both economically and politically) to be approved by all parties, due diligence by Russia must have been exercised.

In 1995, the Russian Federation was still trying to economically recover from internal corruption and currency devaluation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, we cannot neglect to acknowledge the political fact, that in this Post-Cold War period with only one remaining Superpower, a lack of due diligence into the scope of Iran's nuclear intentions might have incited a negative American policy response. If Moscow had not been well-convinced of Tehran's civilian nuclear intentions, then why would they enter into such a politically risky agreement with so many international observers including the United States, which had blocked all previous partnerships following the Revolution?

Hence, we must look to the 1995 agreement with Russia not just as a trivial point in the contextual timeline but rather a watershed marking an investigation based on due diligence into the innocence of Tehran's nuclear aspirations and the beginning of Russian nuclear surveillance.

However, although monitoring by the IAEA was continuing in 2002, a group of defectors of the National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI) accused Iran of

hiding a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water plant at Arak. These accusations, although not verified publicly by any intelligence agency, supported a claim that Iran did not have intentions solely to develop a civilian nuclear program but also may be in the early stages of nuclear weapons development.

Thus, we cannot neglect the facts that although the accusations were rendered by an internal faction, we must acknowledge that this faction was diametrically opposed to the reformist government of President Khatami and had their own political ambitions influencing their actions. This statement is not to say in anyway that these accusations were fabricated but rather we must weigh the source of these accusations against the facts that both Russia and the IAEA monitoring of Iranian nuclear facilities was on-going and President Khatami was viewed by many nations in the European Union to be a modernist, elected on a platform of Pro-Western dialogue.

The IAEA led by Dr. Mohammed El Baradei has been increasingly scrutinizing the nuclear plans of Tehran ever since the NCRI accusations surfaced in 2002. To date, the IAEA has found no evidence to support American and NCRI claims that Iran wants to develop nuclear weapons. However, the IAEA, including Dr. El Baradei, has publicly stated doubts about whether Tehran has been entirely transparent with regard to their nuclear intentions. In 2004, in a House Subcommittee assembly on the Middle East and Central Asia, Dr. El Baradei stated with regard to Iranian nuclear proliferation, “We have not yet seen that, but I am not excluding that possibility.”

Nevertheless, the current religious government in Iran still explicitly states as Ayatollah Khomeini did during his period of geopolitical instability and conventional weapons proliferation aforementioned, that Iran is not pursuing weapons of mass destruction including nuclear arms and that its nuclear ambitions are only for a peaceful civilian nuclear power project.

In 2003, in a comment to the state news agency, IRNA, Ayatollah Khamenei, the current leader of the Iranian Revolution explicitly reaffirmed that “the Islamic Republic of Iran, based on its fundamental and legal beliefs, would never resort to the use of weapons of mass destruction.” However, the United States believes that, despite strong denials by Tehran such as that by Ayatollah Khamenei that Iran is implicitly pursuing efforts to construct nuclear weapons.

During a speech in June 2003, President Bush bluntly stated that the United States “will not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon in Iran. ” American policymakers believe that there is no economic justification for a state that is currently rich in oil and natural gas reserves like Iran to construct such expensive nuclear fuel cycle facilities.

Tehran has responded to these allegations by confirming that they are interested in nuclear power only for civilian purposes, and in the short-term, such endeavors would free up additional oil and natural gas resources for export, thus given the current dynamic of global energy markets, increase foreign revenue which would lead to growth in domestic development and GDP. Finally, Iran maintains that as a party to the IAEA Non-Proliferation Treaty, it has a right under Article 4 to obtain nuclear technology for peaceful purposes as reasserted by newly elected President Ahmadinejad on October 13, 2005 when he stated "...Iran has not violated any of the international laws, or NPT regulations in its peaceful nuclear program and the IAEA Chief's latest report confirms that fact."

The relatively internationally unknown Ahmadinejad has been a source of international political tension and unease since his surprise victory in the August 2005 elections, when he replaced the moderate President Khatami, who over his previous two terms, significantly improved relations between the G-8 member nations and Tehran. Following his election, Ahmadinejad has undertaken a political course which undermines the foreign policy wishes of the G-8. For example, in August, when President Ahmadinejad ordered the removal of the IAEA seals of a reactor, at the main Iranian nuclear research complex at Efshan, which drew widespread condemnation from the United States and Great Britain.

However, throughout this political process, Tehran and Ahmadinejad have not engaged in a nuclear endgame reminiscent of North Korea. Instead, Tehran has repeatedly called for unilateral diplomatic negotiations with the EU-3 to resolve the nuclear issue and maintains that domestic nuclear enrichment (the topic of primary concern) is only necessary because the ever-dynamic geo-political environment of the international community may potentially pose a threat to national security and its sovereign nuclear program if Iran imported enriched uranium from an external source such as Germany or Russia.

We are currently in a political quagmire regarding the nuclear ambition of Iran. Western European nations (especially the EU-3) have urged dialogue in response to long-standing American diplomatic suspicion. However, through this brief, we alluded briefly to the historicity of Iran's nuclear program. We cannot deny that the geo-political threats facing Iran in the present-day are significantly less than during the Cold War that marked a period of potentially catastrophic geo-politics which imminently threatened Iran's national security. Many of these political factors have changed such as the fall of the Soviet Union and Saddam Hussein but nevertheless this imminent threat to Iranian national security is greatly reduced.

This argument is pivotal because during the Iran-Iraq War, in a highly bleak national security situation which was led by a categorically more extremist government by Ayatollah Khomeini, Tehran abided by sharia and never pursued

acquisition, development or deployment of unconventional weapons (including nuclear arms). It was not until the end of the war that Ayatollah Khomeini announced plans to restart Iran's civilian nuclear project in accordance with all IAEA protocols and Russian assistance.

American and European concerns over Iran's nuclear program could not be more polarized, which has led to increased political tension and foreign policy mistrust between all involved parties. For the United States, the specific threat of Iran's nuclear program ranks second to the idea of regime change. For the Europeans, however, concern over Iran's nuclear ambitions is of the essence. Thus, the issue of whether Iran has the right under international law to pursue a civilian nuclear program has become muddled under current American foreign policy. If the American position does not change, the negotiations between the Europeans and Tehran are doomed to fail. Potentially, with a monumental collapse of international negotiation, the Iranians will undoubtedly resume production of highly enriched uranium and eventually acquire nuclear sovereignty.

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