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Get Ready for a Nuclear Iran

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and others will surely follow suit.

By JOHN BOLTON

Negotiations grind on toward a fourth U.N. Security Council sanctions resolution against Iran's nuclear weapons program, even as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrives in New York to address the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference. Sanctions advocates acknowledge that the Security Council's ultimate product will do no more than marginally impede Iran's progress.

In Congress, sanctions legislation also creaks along, but that too is simply going through the motions. Russia and China have already rejected key proposals to restrict Iran's access to international financial markets and choke off its importation of refined petroleum products, which domestically are in short supply. Any new U.S. legislation will be ignored and evaded, thus rendering it largely symbolic. Even so, President Obama has opposed the legislation, arguing that unilateral U.S. action could derail his Security Council efforts.

The further pursuit of sanctions is tantamount to doing nothing. Advocating such policies only benefits Iran by providing it cover for continued progress toward its nuclear objective. It creates the comforting illusion of "doing something." Just as "diplomacy" previously afforded Iran the time and legitimacy it needed, sanctions talk now does the same.

Speculating about regime change stopping Iran's nuclear program in time is also a distraction. The Islamic Revolution's iron fist, and willingness to use it against dissenters (who are currently in disarray), means we cannot know whether or when the regime may fall. Long-term efforts at regime change, desirable as they are, will not soon enough prevent Iran from creating nuclear weapons with the ensuing risk of further regional proliferation.

We therefore face a stark, unattractive reality. There are only two options: Iran gets nuclear weapons, or someone uses pre-emptive military force to break Iran's nuclear fuel cycle and paralyze its program, at least temporarily.

There is no possibility the Obama administration will use force, despite its confused and ever-changing formulation about the military option always being "on the table." That leaves Israel, which the administration is implicitly threatening not to resupply with airplanes and weapons lost in attacking Iran—thereby rendering Israel vulnerable to potential retaliation from Hezbollah and Hamas.

It is hard to conclude anything except that the Obama administration is resigned to Iran possessing nuclear weapons. While U.S. policy makers will not welcome that outcome, they certainly hope as a corollary that Iran can be contained and deterred. Since they have ruled out the only immediate alternative, military force, they are doubtless now busy preparing to make lemonade out of this pile of lemons.

President Obama's likely containment/deterrence strategy will feature security assurances to neighboring countries and promises of American

retaliation if Iran uses its nuclear weapons. Unfortunately for this seemingly muscular rhetoric, the simple fact of Iran possessing nuclear weapons would alone dramatically and irreparably alter the Middle East balance of power. Iran does not actually have to use its capabilities to enhance either its regional or global leverage.

Facile analogies to Cold War deterrence rest on the dubious, unproven belief that Iran's nuclear calculus will approximate the Soviet Union's. Iran's theocratic regime and the high value placed on life in the hereafter makes this an exceedingly dangerous assumption.

Even if containment and deterrence might be more successful against Iran than just suggested, nuclear proliferation doesn't stop with Tehran. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and perhaps others will surely seek, and very swiftly, their own nuclear weapons in response. Thus, we would imminently face a multipolar nuclear Middle East waiting only for someone to launch first or transfer weapons to terrorists. Ironically, such an attack might well involve Israel only as an innocent bystander, at least initially.

We should recognize that an Israeli use of military force would be neither precipitate nor disproportionate, but only a last resort in anticipatory self-defense. Arab governments already understand that logic and largely share it themselves. Such a strike would advance both Israel's and America's security interests, and also those of the Arab states.

Nonetheless, the intellectual case for that strike must be better understood in advance by the American public and Congress in order to ensure a sympathetic reaction by Washington. Absent Israeli action, no one should base their future plans on anything except coping with a nuclear Iran.

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