

BULLETIN

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The Impasse over the Iranian Nuclear Program

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Iran refuses to take steps that could substantiate the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program. The dual-track strategy of the international community towards Iran—an offer of incentives coupled with a strengthening of sanctions—has so far failed to deliver the expected results. Despite its limitations, this approach remains the best option available in dealing with Iran, although it seems worthwhile to consider how it could be improved. At the same time, preparation should be undertaken for a scenario whereby Iran would be capable of a swift construction of nuclear weapons.

Iran refuses to take actions that would confirm the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program. It has not been prepared to meet the demands of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to suspend uranium enrichment and heavy water-related projects. Iran has refused to provide the Agency with immediate access to all sites remaining outside the Agency's inspection as well as to the equipment, documentation and officials connected with the nuclear program. Furthermore, Iran is refusing to implement the Additional Protocol to the Safeguards Agreement to the NPT Treaty that would expand the scope of the Agency's inspections. Iran has been describing as falsified any evidence of a possible military dimension of its nuclear activities, including the IAEA's secretary general's report of 24 May 2011 listing new examples of undisclosed past or current activities that might indicate Iranian efforts to acquire capabilities to build nuclear weapons.

Estimated Progress in Iranian Nuclear Program. According to U.S. assessments of February 2011, Iran has not yet taken a decision to build nuclear weapons and it is not clear whether it will decide to, although it does have an adequate scientific, technical and industrial potential to complete construction within the next few years. A former Israeli intelligence chief estimated in January 2011 that Iran would not be capable of building nuclear weapons before 2015.

Different analyses indicate that Iran's current stockpile of low enriched uranium would suffice for the production of between two and four nuclear weapons. Iran is most probably striving to acquire the status of a nuclear threshold state, i.e. one with a capability to produce a nuclear weapon quickly and relatively easily. It has become closer to attaining this goal after obtaining the capacity to enrich uranium to 20%, as this shortens significantly the time needed for enrichment to the required level of 95%. The completion of Iranian plans to triple the enrichment production rate and to double its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium will constitute a further step in that direction. To complete the project, in July 2011 Iran began the installation of a new generation of centrifuges, followed by the start—in August 2011—of the transfer of uranium enrichment from Natanz to the hardened Fordow site near the city of Qom. If successful, the relocation will safeguard the Iranian enrichment capacity against a hypothetical military strike.

Iran continues a systematic development of the means of delivery of nuclear weapons, as confirmed by this year's tests of Schahab-3 and Sejil missiles with an estimated range of 2,000 kilometers and in the launch of the Safir satellite in June. The arsenal currently possessed by Iran can reach targets in Israel, in the Persian Gulf and in Southern and Eastern Europe. Although Iran currently focuses on a development of short- and medium-range missiles, the technologies it is working to improve may be used in future in the production of intercontinental ballistic missiles. While the provisions of NATO's Strategic Concept highlighting real and increasing threats stemming from ballistic missiles' proliferation do not refer to Iran directly, they are rooted first and foremost in the actions launched by that country.

Evaluation of International Community's Actions. The E3+3 group (France, U.K., Germany, U.S., Russia, China, with the support of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) has been pursuing a dual-track strategy vis-à-vis Iran. It combines sanctions with an offer of incentives and dialogue. The list of inducements to Iran includes a proposal of civilian nuclear energy cooperation, but their implementation rests upon the suspension of Iran's enrichment measures and closer cooperation with the IAEA. So far, the incentives have not been successful.

Resolution 1929 adopted by the UN Security Council in June 2010 has significantly strengthened the sanctions imposed on Iran since 2006. It is targeted at concrete steps, institutions, companies and persons connected with Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile programs and its transfer of conventional armaments. It also includes a non-binding call to limit Iranian access to financial transactions that might contribute to the development of weapons of mass destruction. To increase pressure on Iran, UN sanctions were supplemented by unilateral punitive measures applied by, for instance, the United States, EU or Japan and aimed at other sectors of the Iranian economy, including energy.

So far the pressure on Iran has brought partial success. On the one hand, international sanctions have constrained Iranian access to the necessary components, slowing the pace of developing nuclear and missile programs. Additionally, unilateral sanctions have curbed Iranian access to international banking, insurance and transport services, contributing to the drop of foreign investments in the Iranian petroleum sector. The negative effects of sanctions were strengthened by industrial sabotage, such as the Stuxnet computer virus applied most probably by the U.S. and Israel and targeted against the uranium enrichment process.

On the other hand, the sanctions have not safeguarded the attainment of the main goal, as they have not persuaded Iran to halt uranium enrichment or to cooperate fully with the IAEA. Iran has also failed to take any positive steps that would demonstrate its willingness to resolve the current impasse through negotiations. Despite UN sanctions, the country is continuing measures aimed at acquiring the necessary nuclear and ballistic missile components, steadily improving its nuclear program and creating new *faits accomplis*. The impact of unilateral sanctions is mitigated by China's significant involvement in the Iranian economy and high oil prices on the international market; despite the constraints, Iran is continuing to sell oil to such countries as China or India.

Conclusions and Recommendations. So far the dual-track approach has not produced the expected results. Iran's determination may stem from unwillingness to give up its capacity to enrich uranium obtained with such great difficulty and the strategic advantages offered by the ability to build nuclear weapons fast. But there is no better option vis-à-vis Iran, as unilateral concessions would show that it is possible to ignore the recommendations of the international community, setting a dangerous precedent for other countries. A military strike on Iranian nuclear installations does not guarantee success while posing a risk of regional destabilization.

Under the circumstances, it seems worthwhile to consider how the dual-track approach may be improved. On the one hand, Russia's July 2011 proposal for a gradual lifting of sanctions for each step taken by Iran to prove the exclusively peaceful nature of its program, might be used to strengthen the existing incentives. On the other hand, it is uncertain whether the current instruments will dissuade Iran from pursuing further activities bringing it closer to the status of a nuclear threshold state. To prevent this, the sanctions could be supplemented by a list of further Iranian actions perceived as intolerable, along with the costs involved. The catalogue should be accepted by the whole E3+3 group. If China and Russia, which have so far opposed stronger pressure on Iran, are not ready to back the move, the remaining E3+3 members should hammer out such an approach. The prospect of more unilateral sanctions might dissuade Iran from launching alarming steps.

Meanwhile, even if improved, the dual-track approach does not guarantee success. Hence, there is a need to prepare for a scenario in which Iran becomes a nuclear threshold state and possesses an arsenal of long-range ballistic missiles. From the perspective of Poland and other NATO members, it is necessary to implement the NATO ballistic missile defence action plan of June 2011 that lists the steps required to create a system safeguarding against a hypothetical Iranian attack. NATO should also continue talking to Russia and other partners about the future European missile defence architecture.