



INSS Insight No. 430, May 26, 2013

Is the US Receding to a Containment Policy on Iran?

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In March 2012, at the annual AIPAC policy conference, US President Obama affirmed unequivocally that his policy regarding Iran's nuclear advances was a policy of prevention, not containment. Since then he has reiterated on a number of occasions, most recently during his visit to Israel in March of this year, that the US will not allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. Since that visit, another round of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran has failed, and the latest IAEA report on Iran – released May 22, 2013 – indicates that while there are no major surprises, Iran's uranium enrichment and plutonium programs are creeping slowly but surely toward a situation that will soon be unstoppable.

Since prevention became official US policy, voices both in Israel and abroad have continued to express doubts as to whether the President could be trusted on this count. This in turn has prompted repeated assertions from Obama directly, as well as from members of his administration, that this President does not bluff, and that he is indeed sincere. Most likely Obama spent some time during his visit to Israel trying to drive this message home to Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Nevertheless, recent developments on the ground regarding Syria could be interpreted as unwillingness of the Obama administration to use military force, even to confront the actual use of WMD. Obama has backed away from military force in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, although in late 2011 he stipulated explicitly that this would be a red line, with the implicit message that military intervention would be on the table. The lack of interest in intervening militarily in Syria might indicate a similar unwillingness to do so in Iran.

However, this could also be read quite differently. In other words, it is equally plausible that Obama is choosing his next Middle East battle. If one accepts that it is highly unlikely that the administration would employ military force in *two* Middle East crises, it could be that the resistance to using force in Syria means that there is actually a greater chance that it could be used in Iran. This alternative interpretation is strengthened by the

fact that US resistance to intervening in Syria might also be driven by uncertainty as to how force might effectively be employed in this case: what kind of force to use, against which targets, and on behalf of which opposition element. In the case of Iran, the military options are more easily defined, especially if there is a targeted use of force against nuclear facilities. Intervening in Syria, even if chemical weapons use was the trigger, would mean intervening in a raging civil war, a difficult gamble. In Iran, military force could be used in a more precise and targeted manner.

But beyond the issue of trust and the interpretation of developments on the ground in Syria, there is still confusion about US policy on Iran that goes to Obama's ability to uphold the policy, even if he is firmly committed to it. In an effort to substantiate the commitment to prevention and the rejection of containment, the White House has stated that its intelligence services, augmented by information supplied by the IAEA inspectors, will supply timely information for action in case Iran breaks out and embarks on the production path to nuclear weapons.¹ But there are some nagging questions regarding prevention policy as it currently stands. First, it is blatantly apparent that the "diplomatic" route for solving the Iran conundrum has failed, even though the US administration has yet to admit this. In considering the next stage, can the United States indeed depend on the fact that it will obtain reliable information that an Iranian decision to develop nuclear weapons has been taken? If it does, will it be at a stage when there is still a realistic option of employing military force in a manner that will reverse the current trajectory toward a military nuclear capability? And most importantly, will the US ultimately be willing to employ force in dealing with Iran?

These questions are coming into sharper relief of late against the backdrop of claims by different experts. While some continue to maintain that any diversion of nuclear material to a military program will surely be detected by the IAEA, other analysts continue to explore the containment option based on certain doubts they harbor over whether the Iranian decision will necessarily be noted and/or that there will be enough time to then stop Iran.² Both positions cannot be correct, and the grounds for doubting the ability of the US to stop Iran based on timely information are strong.

History is replete with instances of intelligence failures. In this case, depending on IAEA inspectors for the supply of timely information can prove disastrous – not because of the quality of inspections, rather due to the restrictive conditions under which they are conducted. Current inspections in Iran are not carried out according to the more pervasive Additional Protocol, but rather under the (misnamed) "full-scope" or "comprehensive" safeguards procedures, which are actually neither full-scope nor comprehensive. Moreover, Iran could decide to curtail the inspections further, or in the worst case scenario, expel the inspectors, rendering the situation untenable. Would this cause the US

to consider military action to remedy the situation? Without additional cause for concern, this is doubtful. At most, the UN Security Council would sound another warning, which would merely provide Iran with additional time to breakout without being detected.

The even more disturbing scenario that is openly discussed of late is that Iran has parallel, clandestine enrichment and development of nuclear weapons programs. Because of the limitations imposed on the IAEA inspectors and the inherent limitations of intelligence gathering, this scenario cannot be discounted.

The authors of the Kahl et al report on containment argue that “the Obama administration is rightly committed to preventing – not containing – a nuclear-armed Iran, but...prevention efforts, up to and including the use of force, could fail.” It is on this basis that they contend that the United States could eventually be forced to shift to a policy of containment despite current preferences.³ Colin Kahl, the report’s lead author, is a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, and therefore might reflect the thinking of the administration on this subject.

If the implications of these doubts are not addressed head-on and the US policy of prevention adjusted accordingly – and very soon, containment of a nuclear Iran might very likely become the default policy of the United States, even though Obama currently (and adamantly) rejects it.

¹ In addition, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said in his March 12, 2013 testimony that Iran “could not divert safeguarded material and produce a weapon-worth of weapons-grade uranium before this activity is discovered.” See “Iran Can’t Build Nuke without Tripping Alarm Bells, US Says, *Times of Israel*, March 12, 2013.

² See Colin H. Kahl, Raj Pattani and Jacob Stokes, *If All Else Fails: The Challenges of Containing a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, Center for a New American Security, May 2013, <http://www.cnas.org/ifallesefails>.

³ Ibid.