

Two Paths to the Bomb: Iran's Challenge to the United Nations

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Remarks at the University of Vienna

Vienna, Austria

May 15, 2007

In one blinding flash, a nuclear weapon can kill, maim, and destroy on a scale without parallel, sending political shockwaves and economic dislocation across the globe. Three years ago, a high-level commission established by the United Nations Secretary General warned that the “erosion of the nonproliferation regime could become irreversible and result in a cascade of proliferation.”

The risk of such a cascade, the risk of nuclear weapons spreading to renegade regimes and transnational terrorists is one of today's gravest dangers to our United Nations. The Non-Proliferation Treaty is central to global efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, while reducing existing stockpiles and helping countries make peaceful use of nuclear technology.

During the last two weeks, diplomats from over 100 countries met in Vienna to prepare for the next review of the Treaty. There was a good, substantive discussion of ways to strengthen the Treaty. But, as delegations saw firsthand, not all countries support this objective. Indeed, for four of ten days, one country obstructed all proceedings. The country that blocked progress was Iran -- the one country that the IAEA Board, just last year, had reported to the UN Security Council for noncompliance with NPT obligations. And what irony: Iran -- the country found in noncompliance with its NPT obligations -- objected to the conference addressing, of all things, compliance.

Yet, over four days, we also saw the international community unify against and ultimately rebuff Iran's obstructive maneuvers. Iran ultimately yielded . . . but only after completely isolating itself from all over 100 countries. Indeed, whether in Vienna, New York, or the Non-Aligned Movement, Iran finds itself increasingly isolated.

Iran's obstruction and isolation at the NPT Preparatory Conference underscored two points:

- First, almost all the world's countries remain committed to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Violators like Iran are singular cases.
- But, second, the Treaty confronts serious challenges. Left unchecked, these challenges could put at risk global efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, reduce existing stockpiles, and support peaceful benefits.

Fortunately, there are also important opportunities to address these challenges and to strengthen the NPT. I'd like to review three challenges and three opportunities, then talk in more depth about the specific case of Iran.

Three Challenges

There are three main challenges to the NPT:

- the noncompliance of a small number of states,
- the spread of sensitive technologies,
- the interest of terrorists in mass destruction.

North Korea is a leading case of noncompliance. The IAEA Board found North Korea in noncompliance with its safeguards obligations in 1993 and again in 2003. North Korea left the NPT in 2003 and detonated a nuclear explosive last October.

Under significant international pressure, North Korea has agreed to dismantle its nuclear capabilities and return to the NPT. But it has been slow to implement initial actions to shut down and seal the facility where it produced plutonium for its nuclear weapons.

Today, here in Vienna, IAEA inspectors are standing by to return to North Korea at short notice to monitor and verify the shut down of this facility. Our ultimate goal is the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, with North Korea abandoning all nuclear weapons and programs and returning, at an early date to the NPT, as it agreed in September 2005. We are not alone in this goal; Resolution 1718, passed unanimously by the Security Council, requires these actions of North Korea.

Iran is the other blatant case of noncompliance. Since its secret nuclear facilities were revealed publicly in 2002, the IAEA's intensive investigations have raised troubling questions about the nature and intent of Iran's nuclear activities. In February 2006, the IAEA Board reported Iran to the UN Security Council on two grounds: Iran's noncompliance with its safeguards obligations, and the absence of confidence in the peaceful nature of its activities.

The UN Security Council has since adopted three binding resolutions on Iran's nuclear activities, two imposing sanctions targeted against sensitive nuclear activities and individuals and organizations associated with them. Unfortunately, the leaders in Iran have shown no inclination to comply with the Security Council resolutions, and they have been steadily reducing Iran's cooperation with the IAEA. Just last month, President Ahmadinejad defiantly announced the start of enrichment on an "industrial-scale."

Iran's leadership is actively and defiantly pursuing the technology, material, and know-how to produce nuclear weapons. Iran's leaders claim their pursuits are peaceful. But following President Ahmadinejad's defiant announcement, the editor of a conservative daily newspaper, closely connected to Iran's Supreme Leader wrote: "A country that has uranium enrichment is only one step from producing nuclear weapons." And an editorial in another government-controlled newspaper warned: "If the international community fails to resolve the current crisis as soon as possible by accepting Iran's model the world will again witness the proliferation of nuclear weapons."

A second challenge to the NPT is the spread of sensitive nuclear technologies.

The main obstacle facing a leadership determined to produce a nuclear weapon is not the design and assembly of the weapon itself. Rather the main obstacle is acquiring the necessary

fissile material in the form of highly enriched uranium or plutonium. Countries like Iran have pursued sensitive technologies to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium while claiming that their intentions are purely peaceful.

Mohammed ElBaradei has warned that this ability to build bomb-making capabilities in the guise of peaceful nuclear pursuits is a major loophole in the NPT. This loophole can become more of a challenge as more and more countries look to nuclear power to provide energy diversity and reduce carbon emissions.

This loophole will also become more of a challenge if governments decide to acquire their own bomb-making capabilities in response to noncompliance by others. This is a real possibility in the Middle East, where Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability could easily cause others to do the same. And the Middle East is the last place in the world where we need a new nuclear arms race.

A third challenge to the NPT is terrorist pursuit of nuclear weapons or radioactive materials suitable for a "dirty bomb."

Like many other international treaties, the NPT was conceived to deal with states. Increasingly, however, the problems we face are not states – but transnational networks that operate across the boundaries of states. Today, criminal networks are trafficking cocaine, opium, and even people, transporting them across our borders by plane, ship, and truck. These or similar networks could also smuggle nuclear materials that are not properly secured or controlled.

A renegade regime, fearful of retaliation, might not actually use nuclear weapons, but rather brandish them to blackmail or intimidate. However a terrorist group, considering itself invulnerable from retaliation, or hoping for martyrdom, might have little compunction to detonate a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb in one of our cities. The results would be devastating -- and global.

Three Opportunities

The challenges are apparent. We felt them in North Korea's nuclear test. We hear them in the defiant words of President Ahmadinejad. We see them as we continue to unravel A.Q. Kahn's worldwide network for trafficking sensitive technologies.

But there are also opportunities -- opportunities to address these challenges, strengthen the NPT, and benefit from the peaceful side of nuclear technology. Let me mention three.

The first opportunity is the potential for strong, sustained, international diplomacy to reverse noncompliance.

The challenges posed by North Korea and Iran have sparked worldwide concern and condemnation. Both countries are now subject to Chapter VII resolutions of the Security Council. And, based on those resolutions, both countries are subject to intense diplomatic endeavors to convince their leaders to change from a course of confrontation and noncompliance to one of cooperation and constructive negotiation.

Each case is different, but the central problem is similar: To convince the respective regimes that their actions are harming and isolating their people and that they would be more secure without nuclear weapons than with them.

For diplomacy to succeed, it must be serious and sustained, and it must be backed by an appropriate balance of incentives and sanctions. Countries across the world must work together and use a full range of non-military instruments, from global diplomacy to progressively stronger international sanctions.

A second opportunity to strengthen the NPT is represented by the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership. GNEP was announced last year by President Bush. It has been warmly welcomed by a variety of countries who see nuclear power in their future energy mix.

GNEP is designed to meet the increasing demand for nuclear power that is safe and secure, while reducing the risk of proliferating weapons. It envisions safe, proliferation-resistant nuclear reactors and advanced technologies for recycling waste that will minimize requirements for long-term storage. These advanced recycling technologies will also reduce, rather than increase, world-wide inventories of plutonium.

A first step toward GNEP is being developed at the IAEA today. It entails a multilateral system, administered by the IAEA, that would provide reliable assurances of supply of nuclear fuel for nuclear power reactors to back up a commercial market that is already diverse and competitive. The goal is to assist countries gain access to nuclear power without feeling compelled to acquire the sensitive technologies that can be misused to build nuclear weapons.

A third opportunity to strengthen the NPT is represented by the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. This initiative was announced last year by President Bush and President Putin and launched at last year's G-8 Summit. Countries from Europe and across the globe are joining the initiative.

The Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism is intended to strengthen state controls over nuclear and radioactive materials and to increase international cooperation in countering their acquisition by terrorist groups. The initiative builds on ongoing efforts by the US, G-8, EU and IAEA, including programs to remove weapons-grade uranium from lightly-secured research reactors.

Iran's Challenge to the United Nations

Next week Dr. ElBaradei is scheduled to deliver his latest report on Iran's compliance with the resolutions of the Security Council.

IAEA delegations in Vienna, as well as Security Council delegations in New York, will read the report closely to answer two questions:

- First, has Iran suspended all activities of international concern, as required by the Security Council?
- Second, has Iran begun fully cooperating with the IAEA to resolve outstanding questions about its nuclear program?

We would welcome a report verifying that Iran has suspended its enrichment-related activities, has begun to provide the IAEA with answers to outstanding issues related to its enrichment program and plutonium experiments, and has agreed to implement the Additional Protocol, which would allow the IAEA to verify the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran. Unfortunately, it is hard to envision such a report at this time. Iran continues to defy Security Council requirements and shows no sign of planning to comply.

As we await the report, the United States remains in close consultation with Europe, Russia and China. There is strong agreement with these partners on the way ahead, reflecting shared concerns about Iran's noncompliance with international requirements and a common interest in a negotiated solution. The basis for a negotiated solution remains on the table: the package of incentives offered by the six Foreign Ministers of Europe, Russia, China and the United States.

The package offers substantial economic, political, and technological opportunities for Iran. In the nuclear field, these include:

- reaffirmation of Iran's right to nuclear energy in conformity with its NPT obligations;
- support for building new light-water reactors, using state-of-the-art technology;
- participation in a joint uranium enrichment venture in Russia;
- and legally-binding assurances of fuel supply for future reactors.

The package also opens the prospect for political dialogue and economic cooperation beyond the nuclear field. The United States is prepared to take the historic step of sitting down with our European, Russian and Chinese partners and engaging directly with Iran on its nuclear program. But Iran's leadership must first comply with its obligations to the Security Council and IAEA. We and our partners agree that, if Iran fails to meet these international requirements, the Security Council will need to take further action.

Conclusion

Iran is pursuing two paths to a nuclear weapon: A uranium path and a plutonium path. We want Iran's leaders to choose a different path: The path of cooperation, negotiations, and truly peaceful use of nuclear technology. Our goal is to convince Iran's leaders to take that alternate path.

Success will require global diplomacy that is resolute and sustained. And success will require continued, close cooperation between the United States, Europe, and other countries across the world resolved to confront this serious challenge.

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