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RESPONDING TO IRANIAN NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT: WEIGHING THE OPTIONS

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Suspicion has increased in recent weeks that Iran's nuclear program, despite repeated Iranian statements to the contrary, is indeed intended for military purposes. In early August, *The Los Angeles Times*, following a three-month investigation, published an article entitled "Iran Closes In on Ability to Build a Nuclear Bomb." The article presents a plethora of evidence on the basis of which it concludes that "Iran's commercial program masks a plan to become the world's next nuclear power." Moreover, European sources cited in the article argue that Iran's attempts in recent months to buy critical dual-use technology mean that Iran has actually moved to an advanced stage of weapons development. Reports of action by French and German authorities to stop problematic transactions in this regard place the issue of Iranian nuclear development in a very different light than was the case with Iraq. Greater attention to Iran's nuclear development is also evident in accounts of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's meeting with President Bush several weeks ago, during which he reportedly presented evidence to the effect that Iran would be able to enrich uranium or produce weapons-

grade plutonium within one to two years, thus enabling it to reach the point of no return in nuclear weapons development far earlier than predicted in American estimates.

With evidence piling up of Iranian intentions to pursue a clandestine military nuclear program and more and more states expressing real concern, the question of how to deal with the threat is coming into sharper focus. At the international level, the IAEA severely criticized Iran two months ago for keeping certain nuclear activities secret and urged it to sign the Additional Protocol. Although it took no action against Iran, the IAEA Board of Governors will revisit the issue when it meets in Vienna in early September to review the report of Director General Muhamed ElBaradei. Meanwhile, the US seems to have decided at this point against military action and is pursuing a diplomatic course aimed at garnering international support for action that will prevent Iran from going forward with its plans and perhaps convince it to abandon its nuclear ambitions. The US has gained support for this effort from Russia and Europe. Finally, it should be mentioned that the military option was momentarily thrust back on

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the agenda in mid-August when Jim Hoagland reported in *The Washington Post* that Sharon's presentation to Bush -- especially the Prime Minister's assertion that Israel could not accept the possibility of Iran being able to launch a "nuclear Holocaust" against Israel -- "triggered concern here that Israel is seriously considering a preemptive strike against Iran's Bushehr nuclear reactor."

The policy options mentioned above represent two distinct directions for possible action with regard to Iran: various types of diplomatic initiative or preemptive military action. In considering the relative merits of the two, many commentators have highlighted the serious drawbacks of military action for the US and even more so for Israel. Perhaps as a result of further reflection, Sharon is reported to have decided to keep a lower profile on the nuclear issue in order to enable the US to pursue the diplomatic route. It is therefore likely that the US will stay the diplomatic course, at least as long as it continues to enjoy a significant degree of international support and cooperation.

However, there is an important dimension of this policy debate that appears to have been overlooked. It is that, in one major respect, the two options may actually just be different sides of the same coin in the sense that they both target Iran's capabilities without giving much consideration to its security concerns and interests. The difference between the two boils down to the choice of means for bringing about the dismantling of Iran's nuclear program. But there is apparently little thought given to the long-term viability of a diplomatic initiative that seeks to contain Iran's nuclear program without a concurrent serious attempt to address Iran's motivation for pursuing this option. Bush says that he wants to convince Iran to abandon attempts to develop nuclear weapons -- to speak clearly to the Iranian administration so that it

understands that such an effort is not in its interest. But the diplomatic route thus far primarily relies on the application of pressure intended to force Iran to come to this conclusion. In the *Los Angeles Times* article, George Perkovich is quoted as saying that efforts should be made to reverse Iranian policy by providing better options to fuel Bushehr and by easing the security concerns that make Iranians interested in getting a bomb. In a similar vein, ElBaradei is quoted as saying that stopping the spread of WMD depends to a considerable degree on eliminating the incentives of states to possess them. Such concerns were at the forefront of the US attempt to lead the Middle East dialogue on arms control and regional security in the first half of the 1990s in the context of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group. But although the Administration has advocated "different strategies for different threats" with regard to WMD, it has not factored them into current policy toward Iran.

It is not altogether clear what Iranian security interests and incentives are. They may spring from regional hegemonic aspirations, from a desire to balance Israel's strategic superiority, from fears of growing US influence and presence in Iran's neighborhood, or from some combination of these and other considerations. But whatever the explanation, a greater effort to understand them will be important over the long term, whether or not the diplomatic route is successful. Consequently, ongoing and international pressure on Iran to reverse its development program may be usefully complemented by simultaneous efforts to recreate a forum for regional security dialogue that might reduce Iran's incentives to "go nuclear" by addressing some of its security concerns through regional understandings and arrangements.