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The UN vs. Iran – What Next?

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No one can foretell with certainty what will be Iran's long-range policy following the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors (BOG) resolution of 12 September dealing with the "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran." This resolution included the statement that "...it is essential and urgent in order to ensure IAEA verification of non-diversion of nuclear material that Iran remedy all failures identified by the Agency and cooperate fully with the Agency to ensure verification of compliance with Iran's safeguards agreement by taking all necessary actions by the end of October 2003..." The resolution also called on Iran to "to suspend all further uranium enrichment-related activities..."

The failures noted in the resolution and in the report on which it is based are numerous and of varying degree of seriousness. However, one thing can be certain: the sum total of these failures (and probably others that are as yet unknown) points to the unavoidable conclusion that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. It is interesting to note that the IAEA stopped short of stating this conclusion, although it strongly hints at it in its report to the BOG. Both Iran and the international community now face a variety of possible options.

Iranian Options

Following the BOG meeting, Iran appears to be left with the following main choices: it can accede to the demands of the IAEA resolution; reject them; withdraw from the NPT; or not take any formal action at all, playing for time.

Given the importance of honor and national pride in Middle Eastern affairs, it is difficult to imagine Iran really abandoning its military nuclear ambitions at this stage of the game. Indeed, it is not even certain that a change of regime would

result in Iran adopting that course of action. Any Iranian government would have to be convinced that such a choice was truly in Iran's national interest. Besides, the burden of proving that it had genuinely abandoned any nuclear ambitions would be very heavy.

Consequently, even if Iran does accede to the wishes of the IAEA, including adherence to the Additional Protocol, it will not necessarily mean that it has foreclosed its military nuclear options. It could also mean that it chose one of two alternative routes to the future. One would be to disclose all now and continue with a "peaceful" program while waiting until the time is ripe to withdraw from the NPT according to Article X, which permits withdrawal when "...extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country." Iran would then be in a position to proceed rapidly and acquire a military nuclear capability within a relatively short period of time. The other route would be to carry on with a parallel, concealed program that could produce a military nuclear capability notwithstanding the stricter verification activities stipulated in the Additional Protocol. This route would be more risky but, if successful, ultimately more profitable for Iran.

Options for the International Community

If the choices for Iran are complicated, those facing the international community are no less problematic. These amount to doing nothing; trying to continue dealing with the issue within the IAEA framework; or transferring the issue to the UN Security Council, which could then either take concrete action or just "note" the facts and let it go at that.

Given the complexity of the decision making process on the international level, inaction has become the default option of the Security Council when forced to confront serious issues. In many cases, its decisions are the result of laboriously negotiated compromises among the Council members, often resulting in ambiguous or feeble outcomes that omit what is essential for the real resolution of an issue.

Should Iran fail to comply with the demands of the IAEA and instead stick to the old system of verification -- which it is legally entitled to do -- the IAEA could either transfer the problem to the Security Council or just content itself with a strong censure and warning. But the United States will almost certainly insist on the first course of action and confront the Security Council with several alternatives. One would be to threaten Iran with military action. But this is highly unlikely, especially at this stage, since any draft resolution suggesting the use of force would certainly be vetoed by one or another permanent member of the Council. Sanctions could be imposed on Iran. However, their scope and duration would have to be agreed on, at least among the five permanent members, and because of economic considerations (including oil), agreement would only be possible on a very low common denominator. Thus, sanctions are highly unlikely, and if approved, would

not be very effective. Finally, total inaction would in effect be a major boost to Iran's image and a victory on the political front.

However, the response of the "international community," whatever it may be, is in some sense of secondary importance. The real issue is the reaction to this situation of various individual countries. It is difficult to know in which components of the project Iran has already achieved technical independence. But in those for which in which it has not, such as the Bushehr nuclear power reactor, international assistance is of paramount importance. Should countries providing that assistance continue to help Iran promote its ambitions, the situation could become even more serious. For example, by supplying Iran with the nuclear fuel for the Bushehr reactor, Russia will be sending out the wrong message.

Should the outside world prove able to resist the economic temptations, take the correct individual and communal decisions, and send Iran a unified message, Iran might be prompted to pause and rethink the entire issue. Little else stands in the way of Iran ultimately becoming a *de facto* nuclear-weapon state.

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