

Facing the Iranian Challenge: The American Options

Gary Samore

The focus of this piece is the range of diplomatic options available to President-elect Barack Obama once he enters office in January in terms of the Iranian nuclear threat. That is, how Obama will prevent Iran from acquiring further nuclear weapons capabilities that would allow Iran to produce large quantities of weapons-grade nuclear materials. In addition, in order to be realistic about the possibility that the US will not be able to stop Iran through diplomatic means, the US strategy if those diplomatic efforts fail will be addressed.

For three years, since 2006, the US under President Bush has employed a classic “carrot and stick” strategy, a diplomatic strategy used to try to halt or slow down Iran’s nuclear program. On the “stick” side, or the disciplinary side, Washington is joined by an international coalition of big powers: the so-called EU-3, the EU+3, or the P5+1. This international coalition has joined together in an effort to impose political pressure and economic sanctions against Iran, in order to convince Iran to suspend its enrichment program as a condition for beginning multi-national nuclear negotiations.

On the “carrot” or benefit side of the strategy, the US has offered support through a generous offer from the international coalition to support Iran’s civil nuclear power program. This offer includes guarantees of fuel supplies and access to modern nuclear technology, under the condition that Iran agrees to a ten-year moratorium on its enrichment program.

Unfortunately for the international community, this strategy has failed, which is evident through the fact that Iran has ignored international

pressure and has continued its enrichment program in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions. To date, Iran is just a few short steps away from having mastered the P1 centrifuge technology that it obtained from Pakistan twenty years ago. Furthermore, Iran has now embarked on a program to build up its number of centrifuges and its stockpile of low enriched uranium. Eventually, this supply of centrifuges and low enriched uranium will create an option for Iran to produce enough highly enriched uranium quickly enough to support a nuclear weapons program, and create a so-called nuclear breakout.

Iran is still a few years away from having a credible nuclear breakout option, specifically in terms of confidence that it can produce large quantities of weapons-grade material quickly enough before any preventive action could be taken. However, this is really a political judgment; it is not a technical judgment. The Iranians at some point will have to make a decision about what is a safe period of time for them to make their move: if they make the political decision to build nuclear weapons they will have to decide what is the safe period where they are confident they can be successful before action can be taken against them.

Iran has a very complicated and diverse political system. Publicly the official Iranian position is that the US will not attack it, but in reality Iran is sensitive and nervous about the possibility of getting into a war with the US. This is because Iran can recognize the disparity in power and realize that it is not in its interest to fight the US. In any event, it is clear that time is working to Iran's benefit. Even worse, there is a growing sense in the region and more broadly that Iran's nuclear effort is unstoppable.

When the Obama administration begins its term in January, it will be under pressure on a large number of issues. In regard to Iran, the Obama administration first of all needs to reverse the defeatist tendencies of the Bush administration, and second, must try to take diplomatic action to change the status quo. Based on statements that have been made already by President-elect Obama and his advisors, it is very likely that the new administration will attempt some sort of variation on the existing diplomatic strategy used by the Bush administration. However, it will try to develop and employ bigger carrots and bigger sticks in order to convince Iran's leaders to curb their enrichment program in exchange for receiving benefits and avoiding punishments.

There are three possible reasons why the Obama administration might succeed where the Bush administration has failed. First and foremost is the collapse in world oil prices: this collapse has made Iran more vulnerable to the threat of economic sanctions and increased public discontent within Iran over the disastrous economic policies of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. To some extent, the Iranians might be more inclined to seek a diplomatic solution if they believe the alternative could increase public opposition to the regime, which is already suffering a number of very difficult economic hardships. If nothing else, Iran's economic troubles give the US and its allies a stronger argument with reluctant countries that sanctions are worth another try and might even succeed.

Second, the Obama administration will be in a stronger, more credible position to offer a genuine improvement in US-Iran relations if the nuclear issue is resolved. The Bush administration's effort in this area was severely weakened by internal disagreements on whether and how to engage Iran. In contrast, the Obama administration will be less hampered by these internal divisions. It is more likely to propose beginning direct unconditional talks with Iran on a range of issues as part of an effort to get multi-national nuclear talks started. In such talks it is expected that the administration will be willing to offer improvements in both bilateral economic and political relations with Iran if it agrees to curb its nuclear program. By making these offers public, the US might be able to generate internal pressure among those elements of the Iranian public and elite that would genuinely prefer better relations with the United States.

Third and possibly the most challenging for a successful diplomatic strategy, the Obama administration will need to line up support for much stronger sanctions to pressure Iran to suspend its enrichment program while negotiations take place, and eventually accept serious limits if a nuclear deal cannot be reached. In contrast to President Bush, Obama's popularity in Europe will give him a stronger political base, at least during the honeymoon period, to appeal to reluctant governments and publics. Furthermore, it will allow him to impose stronger financial and other sanctions against Iran beyond those mandated by the Security Council.

Getting Russia and China to support stronger UN sanctions will be much more difficult because Moscow and Beijing do not share the US and European concern about Iran's nuclear program to the point that they

would be willing to seriously jeopardize their bilateral relations with Iran for the sake of trying to stop its nuclear weapons efforts. Nonetheless, the Obama administration will have a fresh chance to strike a new deal with Russia, for example, by offering to abandon missile defense in Europe if Russia works with the United States to halt Iran's enrichment program.

Another element of a successful diplomatic strategy will be the credible threat of force if diplomacy fails. The diplomatic effort really cannot succeed unless the Iranians believe that they run a high risk of suffering a military attack if they turn down a reasonable offer from the US. This will be a challenge for the Obama administration; however, because of his ability to appeal to world opinion, including in the Arab world, President Obama may be in a better position than his predecessor to make a credible argument for using force if diplomacy fails.

The threat of using force actually increases if the US is able to begin to withdraw its forces from Iraq in an orderly way. One of the reasons why the Iranians have felt protected for the last few years is because of the US entrapment in the mess that has become Iraq. When Iraq appears to be stable, to the extent that the US can begin to withdraw its forces and take them out of harm's way, it naturally begins to restore the credibility of the US military option. In that case, this may give the Iranian leadership pause about the potential consequences if they turn down an offer from the US. In Iran's mind it is a question of US will, and it is known that the Iranians are very sensitive to the threat from the United States. Therefore, the US needs to recover the credibility that it once had, rather than create it.

Rhetoric alone is not going to convince the Iranians; they have repeatedly heard the options on the table and have yet to accept them. Rather, the US needs to think about actions, be they military exercises or other steps that will convince Iran that the US is prepared to use military force. It is not an easy task to take action at the same time that one is engaging in diplomacy, but it is one that the Obama administration might have to face in the future.

While arguments have been presented why the Obama administration can play a stronger diplomatic hand, in order to be realistic one must accept that at this point, stopping Iran is going to be a very difficult challenge. Right now Iran's leadership appears to believe that they are in a strong position to pursue their nuclear ambitions within acceptable risks, and they

probably value the acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability much more than better relations with the United States. In fact, some of Iran's leaders probably prefer a hostile relationship with the US because it allows them to have better opportunities to try to mobilize regional opposition to the US and justify its repressive measures at home.

Furthermore, broadening the agenda of the discussion between the US and Iran to include a range of other issues may actually make a solution more difficult because there are real limits to the extent to which the US can recognize Iran's position in the region as part of a nuclear deal. Under these circumstances Tehran's natural instincts will be to drag out the negotiations with various diversions and hints of concessions, something that historically it is successful at, while it continues to build up enrichment capability.

In order to stop this from occurring, the US will probably need to declare a deadline at some point in order to force Iran to choose between suspending enrichment and facing stronger sanctions. It is important to remember that the near term objective of engagement is not a comprehensive agreement, which would probably take years to negotiate. The immediate objective is mutual suspension: Iran suspends enrichment activities, the US and the international coalition suspend sanctions, and that creates political space to try to negotiate a permanent agreement. The key focus needs to be the tactical objective as the one that is possible to achieve, rather than an overall solution, which could not reasonably be expected in the near term.

Iran is certain to resist US efforts to end or delay its enrichment program for a long period of time. There will be some temptation in the US to seek a technical solution that would accept some limited enrichment in Iran, but with technical and political constraints to make it more difficult for Iran to break out and produce nuclear weapons. For example, one could try to limit the number of centrifuge machines or the size of the stockpile of low enriched uranium that the Iranians have on hand. Such a technical compromise sounds good on paper, but it does not exist in reality. This is because there is no evidence that Iran is willing to accept meaningful constraints on its enrichment program beyond those required by the NPT. Furthermore, any agreement along these lines runs the risk of legitimizing Iran's enrichment program while at the same time putting Iran in a stronger position to renege or cheat on the deal when it thinks it is safe to do so.

If the diplomatic efforts fail, the US will be left with two very unappealing options. On one hand the US can revert to a strategy of containment and deterrence: try to weaken Iran with long term sanctions, and slow its nuclear development through interdiction and export controls. In doing so, it tries to deter Iran from using nuclear weapons or pursuing more aggressive policies by offering nuclear guarantees and enhanced defense cooperation with American allies in the region. On the other hand, the US can attack Iran's nuclear facilities to delay, that it, to set back its technical progress and reset the diplomatic clock. In choosing between these two unappealing options, the US will take three factors into consideration.

First, the US needs to reflect on the expected utility of a military attack, in terms of how much damage it will inflict and how long it would take Iran to rebuild its nuclear capabilities. This calculation will need to take into account the possibility that Iran has covert facilities and that Iran has presumably taken precautionary measures to stockpile materials and equipment so that it can rebuild in the aftermath of an attack.

Second, the US needs to consider what the risks are of a military attack and what Iran's retaliation would be. Will Iran be cautious and confine itself to limited retaliation through proxies and covert action? Or will Iran take steps that lead to a broader military conflict, which could include direct attacks on the US and its allies and potentially disrupt oil production and shipping?

And third, the new administration needs to think about the risks of not acting. While it is possible that the US and the international community will be able to erect barriers to keep Iran below the threshold of actually building nuclear weapons, it may also be inevitable that Iran will eventually choose to exercise its nuclear option once it is available. Furthermore, if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, the US needs to consider whether deterrence would be effective to prevent use or transfer of nuclear weapons. Lastly, the risk of accidental or unauthorized use or transfer of weapons and the threat of further proliferation in the region if Iran has nuclear weapons will be at the forefront of the US agenda.

There is no possible way to answer these questions with certainty, and these are the issues that the Obama administration will have to consider when faced with a decision on whether to take action against Iran. However, it is far better to avoid having to make this choice, and there

is evidence that the Obama administration is in a better position than the Bush administration to mount an effective diplomatic strategy, by being able to threaten more effective punishments. Unfortunately, in the Middle East the best that can be hoped for is a short term fix, until there are some fundamental changes. It is doubtful that there is going to be a resolution to any of the fundamental threats and challenges the region faces.

While the Obama administration has inherited a weak political hand from Bush, the administration will have the opportunity to try to make progress, or at least to try to manage and delay some of these threats that the US faces. However, only over the next few years will it be seen whether these opportunities are met with success.