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Iran at the Nuclear Crossroads

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On July 31, 2006, the UN Security Council (SC) adopted resolution 1696, which makes it mandatory (under Article 40 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter) for Iran "to take the steps required by the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors... which are essential to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful purpose of its nuclear programme"...¹ The IAEA was requested to report by August 31 on whether Iran has established full and sustained suspension of all activities mentioned in the resolution, as well as on "the process of Iranian compliance with all the steps required by the IAEA Board". Thus, Iran has much less than a month in which to comply in order to enable the IAEA to verify its compliance and present a positive report to the SC.

In his address to the SC following the adoption of the resolution, the Iranian ambassador to the UN did not give any clue as to Iran's intentions, although he did state that "they [i.e., Iranians] had also showed, time and again, their resilience in the face of pressure, threat, injustice and imposition". He did, however, insist that the sole reason for the Council's action was "that Iran had decided, after over two years of negotiations, to resume the exercise of its inalienable right to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes..." Many Iranian leaders also spoke of the humiliation that Iran would suffer if it were forced to abandon its uranium enrichment and other programs of a military potential. It is quite probable that Iran will not heed the SC request. It is not yet certain whether the SC will be willing to impose sanctions against Iran, but Iran almost certainly cannot depend on SC passivity as a long-term strategy. It would seem that Iran's play for time is nearing its end.

What are Iran's options? Iran is a wily opponent which has often acted unpredictably in the past. However, it now appears to face a difficult choice: it can acquiesce to the SC demands; it can simply ignore the SC demands and hope for the best; it can continue to play for time; it can suspend inspections or rescind the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA; or it can withdraw from the NPT, following the North

¹ Quoting Article 40 of Chapter VII is a first step "before making the recommendations or deciding upon the measures provided for [in other Articles]..."

Korean precedent. One thing should not be in doubt: it will persist in its quest for nuclear weapons, if not under IAEA inspections then clandestinely.

It will be very difficult for Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions, for a variety of reasons. The first is the need to deter several perceived threats: US armed forces in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Gulf pose a danger from almost every direction; Iraq, though currently incapable of threatening any of its neighbors, could eventually reemerge as a regional force; and Israel is seen as a hostile nuclear-weapons state. Secondly, there is an internal factor: the current Iranian regime has been successful in rallying the nation around its nuclear program, which is perhaps the only policy uniting the population, and undoing this could help hasten its downfall.

Finally, there is an evolving regional aspect which is much more complex. According to recent media reports, Iran was unhappy with Hizbullah's initiation of the July 12 incident that rapidly developed into a full-scale confrontation with Israel. Iran's displeasure probably stemmed from the fact that it was not in control of developments and that the timing was premature from its perspective. Iran and Syria have armed Hizbullah with a vast arsenal of short- medium- and longer-range rockets. However, Iran's role as an arms supplier has been secondary, and it cannot be satisfied unless it is the lead actor. This would have been the case if the confrontation had been deferred until Iran had acquired a military nuclear weapons capability. In that case, an Iranian nuclear weapon could have served as a deterrent against a major Israeli strike or counter-attack against Hizbullah and/or Syria. Even more ominous is the possibility of a decisive nuclear strike against Israel. That might appear to some to be a far-fetched scenario, but given the proclamations of Iran's leaders, especially President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, it cannot be categorically excluded.

Given Iran's determination to secure a military nuclear capability, the moment of truth is approaching, not only for Iran but also for the Security Council. Unless the Council imposes severe penalties, Iran will use any available time to complete the construction of its uranium enrichment plant and start producing weapons-grade enriched uranium. Although Iran's program can be suspended or reversed at almost any given time, it becomes more difficult to do so as their work progresses. The first significant step has been taken at the UN, by threatening Iran with sanctions. The time for the next step is nearing, but if SC members such as Russia and China refuse to do so, they will play directly into the Iranians' hands. Failure to impose sanctions, beginning with suspension of direct trade in scientific and technical materials, equipment and know-how that could assist in the quest for nuclear weapons and then moving, if necessary, to even more severe measures such as an embargo on refined oil products, would signal to Iran, rhetoric notwithstanding, that the rest of the world is actually prepared to live with an Iranian nuclear weapon.

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