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Are the P5+1 Waging a Campaign against the Military Option?

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In response to the ongoing public criticism of the Geneva agreement, the P5+1 have expressed understanding of the skepticism in Israel and other Middle East states about Iran's sincerity and its intention to honor its commitments under the agreement. They contend, however, that it is valuable as a partial interim agreement intended to create a better atmosphere for important discussions on a permanent settlement with Iran on the issue of its nuclear activity.

It is difficult, therefore, to understand the outbursts of joy and the affection shown toward the Iranians by the P5+1 leaders after the agreement was signed. It is hard to believe that the P5+1 representatives did not realize that this sends a message that the agreement has led to a dramatic change toward Iran. Evidenced by the conduct of the P5+1 states – even if this was not their intention – Iran is now presented as a country increasingly integrated into the family of nations and as an element that will help resolve the crisis, more than as the country responsible for the crisis in the first place. The strategic significance of this image is that Iran is increasingly distanced from its status as a radical, isolated state that under certain circumstances constitutes a legitimate object of military action.

Since the signing of the agreement, the P5+1 leaders, especially President Obama, have made numerous statements that challenge the very idea of a military option against Iran as a realistic option. Furthermore, in almost every speech, Obama has taken the trouble to criticize harshly, albeit implicitly, Prime Minister Netanyahu, who despite his denials has been portrayed as preaching the value of the military option.

These comments clearly indicate that the P5+1 reject the message of the agreement's critics, particularly Netanyahu, that Iran views its nuclear project as a supreme national interest and that it would agree to give it up only if it were clearly convinced that a sharp sword were being held to its neck – i.e., that there is a credible military option and the US administration is determined to use it if Iran does not fulfill its commitments. Comments by the P5+1 leaders categorically show a very different way of thinking.

Even before the agreement was signed, President Obama made his reservations clear about the military option and his strong preference for achieving a peaceful settlement. On November 14, 2013 he indicated that the United States prefers to have Iran make a decision not to possess nuclear weapons and for the United States to verify this. The President emphasized the obvious risks involved in a military action, since “no matter how good our military is, military options are always messy, are always difficult, always have unintended consequences.”

The President further questioned the expectations of the military option against Iran. It is in no way clear, he argued, that this option would halt Iran’s nuclear activity, and it is even possible that it would lead Iran to accelerate work in this direction “more vigorously.” These comments send a clear message: Even if a military strike ended “successfully,” it is not certain that it would deter Iran from continuing its nuclear activity with full force. These comments also likely contained an implicit message to Israel: if the United States, whose military capabilities are far superior to Israel’s, is dubious about the expectations of a military strike against Iran, then Israel ought to be far more skeptical.

On November 23, 2013, immediately after the agreement was reached, the President returned to this motif: “Ultimately,” he stated, “only diplomacy can bring about a durable solution to the challenge posed by Iran’s nuclear program. As President and Commander-in-Chief, I will do what is necessary to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.” In a statement that suggests that the President was seeking to distinguish himself from other leaders (presumably Netanyahu), Obama added that “I have a profound responsibility to try to resolve our differences peacefully, rather than rush towards conflict.”

On November 25, 2013, Obama repeated a message which again seems to be directed to Prime Minister Netanyahu: “We cannot close the door on diplomacy,” he stated, to applause from the audience, “and we cannot rule out peaceful solutions to the world’s problems. We cannot commit ourselves to an endless cycle of conflict. And tough talk and bluster may be the easy thing to do politically, but it’s not the right thing for our security.”

The following day the President reiterated the US commitment to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear capability. At the same time, he highlighted his visits to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where he met with young soldiers who had been sent to fight for their country and paid a very heavy price, and noted that therefore, he would do “every single thing that I can to try to resolve these issues without resorting to military conflict.” The President added that for the United States “this is not politics; these are not games. And the stakes are extraordinarily high. And we [perhaps in contrast to other countries] make decisions like the one we made, we don’t make them based on political

expedience; we don't make them on the basis of what might make a good headline today or tomorrow."

British Foreign Secretary William Hague was much more direct – even threatening – in cautioning that a military strike against Iran could sabotage the existing agreement. He stressed that Britain "would discourage anybody in the world, including Israel, from taking any steps that would undermine this agreement," adding that "we will make that very clear to all concerned."

Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius of France also warned against use of the military option. In a media interview on November 25, he expressed the belief that ultimately, the agreement with Iran would improve the security of countries in the region. When asked whether there was a threat of an Israeli preemptive strike during the next six months, he replied, "At this stage, no, because no one would understand it."

It thus appears that Prime Minister Netanyahu's repeated statements that Israel does not consider itself bound by the agreement with Iran and his harsh criticism of the accord have raised concerns among the P5+1 states about a possible Israeli military strike against Iran during the next six months. Such an attack, they correctly fear, would cause the collapse of the agreement in which they invested considerable efforts.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the P5+1 leaders seem to be making intensive efforts to delegitimize the military option. At this stage their effort is presumably focused on preventing an Israeli military strike until the current agreement expires. President Obama has been the most explicit on this issue.

