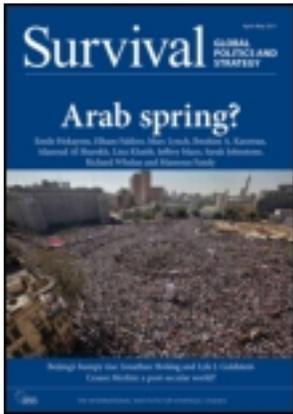


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Survival

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tsur20>

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Available online: 29 Sep 2010

To cite this article: Andrew Parasiliti (2010): After Sanctions, Deter and Engage Iran, *Survival*, 52:5, 13-20

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2010.522092>

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After Sanctions, Deter and Engage Iran

Andrew Parasiliti

US President Barack Obama has said preventing the spread of nuclear weapons is one of his 'highest national security priorities' and that 'the United States and the international community are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons'.¹ A US military deterrent, complemented by intensive diplomacy with Iran, is the best tool to achieve this aim. Deterrence recognises the need for a credible threat of force, but only as a last resort should diplomacy fail and Iran approach or cross a nuclear-weapons threshold. Emphasis should therefore be on sustained and intensive diplomacy, supported by sanctions, to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons and supporting terrorism.

Deterrence versus containment

Deterring Iran should be distinguished from containing Iran.² Containment implies an approach comparable to US policy toward the Soviet Union or China during the Cold War. Containment was not just about deterring a nuclear attack; it was, especially in the Soviet case, a global strategy to prevent an expansion of political and military influence.

We misapply such historical analogies at our peril.³ The differences between the Soviet Union, China and Iran outweigh the similarities: Iran is neither the other superpower in a global bipolar system nor a candidate to become a leading power in a putative multipolar world. Iran has neither

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a land army threatening to overrun its neighbours nor a nuclear arsenal capable of destroying the United States and its allies.

Tehran has limited scope to expand its political and military influence, making it an unlikely candidate for containment in the Soviet sense. Iran is a known quantity in the region and does not appear to be the focus of band-wagging. The Islamic Republic has experienced a crisis of legitimacy since its 12 June 2009 presidential elections, and its economy is in poor shape, partly as a result of sanctions. Many countries do business with Iran, and will continue to do so, because Iran is a significant regional power with vast potential for its energy resources and commercial markets. Iran lacks a network of alliances comparable to the Warsaw Pact, however, and its regional and global influence has been constrained by the disapprobation of the UN Security Council and international sanctions.

Deterrence and force

Deterrence in its most common usage involves the credible threat of military force to prevent a nuclear attack. In the case of Iran, deterrence would be defined as the use of force as a last resort to prevent Iran from crossing a nuclear-weapons threshold.

Obama administration officials have referred to 'all options' and the possible use of force against Iran, but with no mention so far of what might provoke such action. On 4 August, Obama said the United States would use 'all options available to us to prevent a nuclear arms race in the region and to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran'.⁴ Three days earlier, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that 'military actions ... remain on the table' as a contingency for dealing with Iran.⁵

Deterrence would benefit from clarity on the red lines or tripwires for possible US or Israeli military action. These could include discovery of an undeclared Iranian nuclear-weapons facility, or Iran's expelling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, declaring or testing a nuclear weapon, or withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Another tripwire for military action, albeit more problematic, could include Iran's exceeding a threshold amount, set in advance, of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium.⁶

Although Washington is deepening defence and intelligence coordination with its Gulf allies with regard to Iran, comparable diplomatic steps toward Iran or a NATO-style military alliance among Gulf countries will be difficult to obtain. There would probably be little overt support for a US or Israeli military strike against Iran, especially in the Middle East. Even those countries which might privately endorse military action would likely stay quiet to avoid a popular anti-American or anti-Israeli backlash, or to avoid Iran's wrath.

The use of force against Iran would represent a failure of US and international diplomacy. While any military action in a deterrence scenario would be targeted solely at Iran's nuclear facilities and related targets, the use of force would likely have unforeseeable negative consequences in the region. The effect of a military attack inside Iran is also unknown and could prove unpopular among Iranians. Iran should nevertheless be aware of potential consequences, beyond sanctions, should it continue to defy UN security resolutions and decide to pursue a nuclear weapon.

Diplomacy: sanctions and endgame

While a credible military deterrent is a last resort to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon, the first resort remains diplomacy backed by sanctions. Sanctions can serve as prelude, or context, to further diplomacy with Iran. In diplomatic terms, sanctions buy both space and time for further engagement. While many of the proponents of sanctions do not believe that sanctions alone can force Iran to comply with UN resolutions regarding its nuclear programmes, the argument is that they will deprive Iran of revenues, materials and technologies it could otherwise use in those programmes. Sanctions also convey to the Islamic Republic, and to the Iranian people, the high economic and diplomatic costs of continued non-compliance with the IAEA and UN Security Council resolutions.

It is worth reviewing the objectives of sanctions on Iran; that is, exactly what Tehran must do to have sanctions lifted. According to UN Security Council Resolution 1929 (2010), Iran is required to 'cooperate fully with the IAEA on all outstanding issues ... without delay comply fully and without qualification with its IAEA Safeguards Agreement ... ratify promptly the

Additional Protocol, and ... suspend all reprocessing, heavy water-related and enrichment-related activities'. These demands have been documented in resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1929 (2010), and have resulted in increasingly severe sanctions on Iran. The latest UN sanctions embargo eight categories of heavy military equipment; expand penalties against Iranian companies, including those associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; restrict the sale and transfer of missile technologies; prohibit Iranian investment in nuclear industries, including uranium mining; and call for more stringent measures on Iranian shipping, financial, commercial and banking activities. UN sanctions and penalties against Iran would be lifted if the IAEA Board of Governors confirms that 'Iran has fully complied with its obligations under the relevant resolutions of the Security Council and met the requirements' of the board.⁷

There is also the P5+1 (the United States, the UK, Russia, France, China, and Germany, as well as the EU) channel, which complements UN action on Iran. In a 12 June 2008 letter and proposal to Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, the foreign ministers of the P5+1 countries offered Iran a 'broad-based negotiation', including assistance with civil nuclear energy and a guaranteed fuel supply, as well as political and economic issues and regional security, 'as soon as Iran's enrichment-related and reprocessing activities are suspended'.⁸ An EU statement on 26 July 2010 announcing sanctions on Iran noted that 'proposals made to Iran in June 2008 are still valid. The aim of the EU is a settlement which would rebuild international confidence that the [*sic*] Iran's nuclear programme is exclusively peaceful.'⁹

For the United States, there are also concerns about Iran's biological, chemical and missile programmes; its support for terrorism; and, increasingly, Iran's treatment of its own citizens. According to the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010, signed into law by Obama on 1 July 2010, most congressionally imposed sanctions on Iran would be terminated if the president certifies that Iran has 'ceased the pursuit, acquisition, and development of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and ballistic missiles and ballistic missile launch technology' and is no longer a state sponsor of terrorism.¹⁰ US Executive

Orders banning trade or freezing Iranian assets could also be rescinded by the president once this determination is reached. The actions taken by President George W. Bush with regard to Libya in September 2004 are precedent for those that would be taken in the event of a breakthrough with Iran.

Diplomacy: mechanisms and substance

The United States and its allies must choreograph the mechanism and substance for further diplomacy with Iran in three general areas: multilateral talks on Iran's nuclear programmes, US–Iran bilateral talks, and regional security.

Firstly, with regard to nuclear diplomacy, Washington's preferred channels are the P5+1 and the Vienna Group (US, Russia and France, as well as the IAEA). The US should consider reasonable changes in participants for these multilateral talks, such as the inclusion of Turkey and Brazil. Iran has shown a willingness, perhaps in part as a result of sanctions, to engage about its nuclear programmes, as evidenced by its agreement to send 1,200kg of low-enriched uranium to Turkey in return for the delivery of 120kg of nuclear fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor for civilian medical purposes. The 'Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Iran and Brazil', signed in Tehran on 17 May 2010, refers to the nuclear-fuel exchange as 'instrumental in initiating cooperation in different areas' and as a 'starting point' which 'should lead to positive interaction and cooperation in the field of peaceful nuclear activities'.¹¹

Forthcoming nuclear talks should seek adjustments in the Tehran Joint Declaration to address the concerns of the Vienna Group.¹² The Tehran Declaration is a significant diplomatic achievement and should be seized on as an opportunity for intensified diplomacy with Iran. If there is agreement between Iran and the Vienna Group on the fuel swap, Iran could claim a face-saving win for its own diplomacy, perhaps justifying a pause in its enrichment activities, as called for in UN resolutions. Diplomacy would also benefit from the rapid institutionalisation of intensive technical, working-level discussions among the parties, away from the media spotlight. Another outcome of future talks could be a joint communiqué reiterating the incen-

tives in the June 2008 proposal, Iran's commitment to fully cooperate with the IAEA, and the P5+1's acknowledgment of Iran's right to enrichment if it does so.

Secondly, the Obama administration has signalled its willingness to engage in direct talks with Iran. Tehran would probably seek guarantees that the United States will neither attack nor pursue a policy of regime change in Iran, in addition to concrete steps toward the lifting of US sanctions. Direct talks would be linked to the nuclear and regional security discussions. These talks would also be a means of addressing US concerns about Iran's support for terrorism and US and Iranian interests in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere.

Thirdly, there should be a regional diplomatic initiative involving Iran and its Gulf neighbours. Simply put, there will be no lasting security until there is a regional forum involving all parties – Iraq, Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This effort could build on the annual IISS Regional Security Summit (Manama Dialogue). The Gulf states could invite Iran to begin discussions about signing on to existing GCC statements for a nuclear-weapons-free zone and the peaceful use of nuclear energy in the region. Confidence-building mechanisms for economic, environmental and maritime cooperation in the Persian Gulf, and the reconstruction of Iraq, should be on the regional agenda. Iran and its neighbours could set up working groups on the more technical aspects of non-proliferation and ways to combat narcotics trafficking.

* * *

The United States and Iran must be clear on the endgame for diplomacy, sanctions and deterrence, including which developments in Iran's nuclear programmes would trigger the use of force. After three decades of mutual hostility and infrequent direct diplomatic contacts, differences in political culture and diplomatic style, disproportionate involvement of intermediaries and message carriers, and sometimes confusing and mixed signals from those presumed to be speaking for those in authority, such clarity cannot be assumed.

There are lessons from the US experience with Iraq. The US, EU and UN sanctions on Iran are having an effect, as was the case in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. But sanctions can also erode over time, as they did in Iraq. To avoid accusations of faulty or skewed intelligence, especially with regard to the possibility of the use of force, the United States should refrain from hyping the Iranian threat, as it did with Iraq, and base its claims about Iran's nuclear programme primarily on the reports of the IAEA.

The US Congress will seek aggressive enforcement of US sanctions on Iran. Democrats and Republicans are agreed on a tough line on Iran, which is likely to intensify absent a diplomatic breakthrough. There seems to be only a fragile and largely unenthusiastic congressional constituency for engagement with Iran, and no constituency for living with an Iranian nuclear weapon. Congressional pressure on Iran will likely increase in mid-2011 and into the 2012 US presidential campaign, especially if Republicans enjoy substantial gains in the November 2010 congressional elections. Republicans may seek to portray President Obama as naive or misguided for seeking to engage Iran.

The Obama administration should therefore enact a deterrence strategy toward Iran as soon as possible. The US may have gained just slightly more than a year for diplomacy with the passage of UN, US and EU sanctions, given the many questions about Iran's nuclear intentions, Israel's own timelines for dealing with Iran, and the US political calendar. A clear and credible military deterrent will leave no doubt in Iran about what Washington expects. A combination of deterrence and diplomacy, rather than containment, will keep the Iranian threat in perspective. It will also dampen down speculation about the if and when of possible US military action, reassure Congress and US allies that Washington will not tolerate an Iranian nuclear weapon, and, most importantly, shift the focus to the intensive and creative diplomacy that will be required to avoid the consequences of either a US attack on Iran or an Iran with nuclear weapons.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks R.K. Ramazani, Mark Fitzpatrick and Michael Elleman for their comments on earlier drafts of this article, and Claudia Fahren and Michael Joseph for their research assistance.

Notes

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