



MEMO

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U.N. Security Council Must Take Decisive Action Against Iran

The five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council have called on the IAEA to report Iran to the Security Council—an important next step in the international effort to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons. The Security Council must use its authority to make clear to Iran that the continued flouting of its non-proliferation obligations will be met with strong and decisive sanctions and Tehran's further isolation. As President Bush said in his State of the Union address, "The nations of the world must not permit the Iranian regime to gain nuclear weapons." Below are Frequently Asked Questions about Iran's nuclear program and the current status of diplomatic efforts seeking to prevent Iran from acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

Q: Why is it so important to send Iran to the U.N. Security Council now?

A: Time is quickly running out before Iran will have the ability to produce nuclear weapons. Following Iran's most recent provocative actions of breaking U.N. seals on nuclear equipment and resuming enrichment research, international momentum has built towards a referral of Tehran to the U.N. Security Council. In ending its commitments made to the EU-3 (Britain, France and Germany) in November 2004, Iran has made clear that diplomacy led by the EU-3 has failed to persuade the regime to abandon its nuclear program. It is now time for the world community, through the Security Council, to unite in taking more compelling steps to convince Iran that development of nuclear weapons will not be accepted. The unanimous decision by the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council—the United States, Great Britain, China, France and Russia—calling on the IAEA to report Iran to the Security Council is an important step in that direction.

Q: How close is Iran to having nuclear weapons?

A: Given Iran's extensive nuclear infrastructure already in place, Iran is fast approaching the point at which it will have the capability to produce nuclear weapons. We know of two remaining technical obstacles to Iran's program. First, Iran must master the technology of running centrifuges in long cascades to produce highly enriched uranium, the key ingredient for nuclear bombs. Second, Iran must produce enough centrifuges, or rotating vessels, to run an enrichment program. Iran could overcome these obstacles within the coming year. International Atomic Energy Agency head Mohamed ElBaradei said late last year that Iran could be only "months" away from having a nuclear weapon if it begins enriching uranium. Its enrichment facility at Natanz has the capacity for 50,000 centrifuges, which could produce enough highly enriched uranium for up to 50 nuclear weapons a year. With its growing stockpile of converted uranium gas and the emerging evidence of Iranian work on bomb fabrication and nuclear missile warheads, Iran could have nuclear weapons on hand within three to five years—assuming no additional surprises.

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Q: What impact can U.N. Security Council sanctions have on Iran's nuclear program?

A: The Security Council has the legal authority to put in place diplomatic, political and economic sanctions that could alter Iran's present course. Iran's greatest vulnerability is its economy. Sanctions imposed by the U.N. would further increase pressure on the Iranian regime. Despite its oil wealth, Iran's economy is struggling. Every year, one million Iranians enter the labor force, with most being either unemployed or underemployed. Since President Ahmadinejad was elected last summer, Iran's stock market has lost 40% of its value, and there has been a reported capital flight of more than \$200 billion out of Iran. Iran's manufacturing sector is highly dependent on imports from Europe and Asia, which could be embargoed. As Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns said on Nov. 30, the world community should use diplomatic contacts, trade and investment as leverage to "convince the hard-liners in Tehran that there is a price for their misguided policies."

Q: What type of sanctions can be imposed on Iran?

A: Members of Congress and other observers have suggested sanctions that could include shutting off supplies of refined gasoline, a worldwide ban on arms sales, and a possible ban on participation in the Olympics and the World Cup soccer tournament. Sanctions can also be targeted to have maximum impact on the clerical leadership and the Revolutionary Guards that control and profit from key sectors of the Iranian economy. A ban on diplomatic travel would both send a strong message of international unity and target the regime's leadership. Such measures against the Taliban in 1999 helped isolate members of the regime. Banning international flights to and from Iran also would isolate Iran. This sanction was imposed on Libya in response to the finding that its agents were responsible for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am 103.

Q: What has been U.S. policy regarding Iran's violations and the need to submit the issue before the U.N. Security Council?

A: For most of the past two years, the administration's position had been that there was sufficient evidence of Iran's nuclear safeguards violations for the IAEA Board of Governors to refer the issue to the U.N. Security Council. Late last winter, the administration agreed to a short delay to give the EU-3's and Russia's diplomatic efforts a chance. The administration has expressed support for a Russian effort that would allow Iran to continue conversion of uranium yellowcake into uranium hexafluoride gas in Iran. Since the Iranian decision to remove IAEA seals, however, the United States and its allies have made clear that the time has come for Iran's nuclear program to be brought before the Security Council.

Q: What is the Russian proposal, and how might it actually undermine the chances of stopping an Iranian bomb?

A: The Russian proposal—originally endorsed in general terms by the EU-3 and the United States—would allow Iran to have the entire fuel cycle short of uranium enrichment. This contradicts the previous position of the United States and the EU that, because of Iran's long history of nuclear cheating, Iran must suspend, and ultimately dismantle, all nuclear fuel cycle capabilities. Allowing Iran to convert and stockpile uranium hexafluoride gas would provide Iran with the ability to produce nuclear weapons once its enrichment capabilities are in place. Iranian nuclear delegation spokesman Javad Vaeidi viewed the Russian proposal as a diplomatic victory, saying: "The Western red line used to be uranium conversion. Now it is enrichment."

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Q: How has Iran used the Russian proposal to stall action by the United States and EU-3?

A: After initially denying they received any proposal, Iranian officials rejected the offer calling it “unacceptable” then reversed course saying they would “seriously and enthusiastically” study the proposal. Ultimately, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s statement that “the Iranian nation and government will defend the right to nuclear research and technology and will go forward prudently,” combined with the removal of the IAEA seals, made clear that any proposal that entails completely moving enrichment out of Iran will be rejected. Facing the threat of U.N. Security Council referral however, Iranian officials are now back to saying nuclear negotiations with Russia should “continue seriously and constructively,” demonstrating once again that Tehran intends to use the Russian proposal to gain more time to improve its nuclear program and delay sanctions.

Q: Isn’t it better to pursue every diplomatic option before sending Iran to the U.N. Security Council?

A: Every reasonable diplomatic option short of Security Council referral has been pursued, and each effort has reached a dead end in the face of Iran’s hard-line stance. It certainly appears that Iran was using the existence of the talks to buy time to complete its quest for nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, time is running out. Iran even now boasts of using the two years of negotiations with the EU to advance its nuclear program. Referral to the U.N. Security Council does not end the diplomatic process, rather it demonstrates to the Iranians the seriousness with which the entire international community views this issue and changes the context in which Iran’s nuclear program is dealt.

Q: What are Iran’s international non-proliferation obligations?

A: As a non-nuclear member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran has legally foresworn obtaining nuclear weapons and is obliged to declare all nuclear facilities and activities on its soil, and to have all of its nuclear activities under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Q: How has Iran violated these obligations?

A: Iran had a clandestine nuclear program for more than 15 years until it was exposed in 2002. The long list of nuclear activities Iran kept hidden from the IAEA includes: clandestine construction of a pilot uranium enrichment facility; construction of a large-scale enrichment facility; construction of a facility to convert uranium yellowcake into uranium hexafluoride gas—which then can be enriched to create nuclear bombs; construction of a heavy-water reactor that can be used to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons without having to master the uranium enrichment process; importation of the design and components for centrifuges used to enrich uranium; importation of 1.8 tons of uranium yellowcake; experimentation with the separation of plutonium; experimentation with polonium (a radioactive isotope used to trigger and boost nuclear explosions); and the importation of instructions on how to weaponize highly enriched uranium. Iran also recently announced that it has produced equipment for separating uranium from raw ore. While this is an early step in the uranium route to developing nuclear weapons, the equipment is also ideally suited for plutonium separation which could be important as an alternative source of weapons material.

Q: How has the international community responded to these violations by Iran?

A: The IAEA Board of Governors passed a resolution at its September 2005 meeting declaring Iran in non-compliance with its obligations as a member of the NPT. It called on Iran to refrain from uranium conversion and stipulated that unless Iran satisfied the IAEA’s continuing concerns, the IAEA would (at an unspecified date) send the issue to the U.N. Security Council. Under the IAEA’s governing statute, any member found in violation of its nuclear safeguard commitments must be referred to the Security Council.

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After Iran's recent decision to remove the IAEA's seals, the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council met in London to discuss the case. All five nations agreed that Iran should freeze its nuclear program and called on the IAEA to use a Feb. 2 emergency meeting to report Iran's nuclear program to the Security Council.

Q: Since the IAEA declared Iran in "non-compliance" in September, how has Iran responded to efforts by the EU-3 to reach a diplomatic solution?

A: Iran has become more bellicose and more intransigent. Its president has called for Israel's destruction to be followed by America's. Iran has continued to block the access of IAEA inspectors at some suspect sites and refuses to answer continuing questions from the IAEA. Iran dismissed specific calls from the IAEA Board of Governors to suspend all of its nuclear activities by resuming its uranium conversion, which violates a Nov. 2004 agreement reached with the EU-3. Meanwhile, Iranian lawmakers have approved a bill requiring the government to block inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities if the IAEA refers Iran's nuclear program to the U.N. Security Council. The IAEA staff also revealed new information concerning Iran's possession of instructions on how to manufacture the explosive cores for nuclear weapons, another clear sign of Iran's continuing pursuit of nuclear weapons. Iran announced it would start nuclear research, requested that IAEA seals be removed from its uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and two other locations, wavered on the Russian proposal, and continued its threatening rhetoric toward Israel.

Q: What response is Iran likely to take in response to a Security Council referral?

A: While Iran has issued dire warnings about initiating full-scale "industrial" uranium enrichment and ceasing all voluntary cooperation with the IAEA if its case goes to the UN, such steps would only incur more rapid and dramatic sanctions by the international community. Iran still faces several technical hurdles before it could ramp up large-capacity enrichment, and further breaking its safeguards agreement with the IAEA would likely result in a halt to Russian work on, and fuelling of, the Bushehr nuclear reactor and permanently destroy the Iranian cover story that its nuclear program is aimed at energy production.

There is no way of knowing how much international condemnation an ideologically radical regime such as Iran's is willing to endure or the level of international isolation and economic hardship to which it is prepared to subject its people before altering its policies. Nor is there any guarantee that Tehran will ultimately halt its nuclear efforts willingly. It is nevertheless essential that all available diplomatic, political and economic avenues be tried and exhausted before those nations threatened by the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran are forced to consider stronger measures.

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