

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

**“Iran – Preventing Weapons Proliferation, Terrorism
and Promoting Democracy”**

Hearing: May 19, 2005

Summary Statement

Geoffrey Kemp
The Nixon Center
Washington, D.C

The Bush administration and its European allies will soon have to make some tough decisions on what to do about Iran's nuclear ambitions. Iran's extensive program to develop an independent nuclear fuel cycle has reached a point where, short of a radical counter-revolution, no future Iranian government will be prepared to dismantle it. The focus of current negotiations between Iran on the one hand, and the United States and the European Union on the other, is whether the Islamic Republic would be willing to end some activities, such as uranium enrichment, in exchange for assistance with its nuclear power program.

Iran's leaders will never comply even with these demands unless the United States and the EU can offer the Iranian government far more incentives than they have so far been prepared to put on the table. At the same time, as long as talks are ongoing, they are unlikely to precipitate a crisis, at least not in the short term. But absent some fundamental change in the Iranian leadership, combined with a willingness on the part of the Bush Administration to take big risks, the United States is on course for a serious crisis with Iran at some point in the coming months.

When it comes to Iran's nuclear activities, the Bush Administration, like its predecessors, has tried to balance its formal wish to strengthen the global nuclear nonproliferation regime (which requires a high degree of international cooperation) with its specific demands on Iran and the other remaining member of the Axis of Evil, North Korea.

Iran's leaders and many ordinary Iranians accuse the United States of double standards and do not take kindly to the admonitions of the Bush Administration and the European Union about the dangers of their nuclear program, which, so long as it is technically in compliance with NPT rules, is legal. The Mullah's surmise that the reason they are under scrutiny by the United States is because of their policies on other issues, such as support for terrorism and their rejection of Israel's right to exist. After all, the United States had plenty of opportunity to shut down the Bushehr nuclear plant when the Shah began to develop Iran's nuclear program in the 1960s and 1970s. But the Shah was an ally; the strongest pillar for the defense of the Persian Gulf. He was a man we could trust and a friend of Israel. He was the ruler whose country was, to quote President Jimmy Carter in 1978, an "island of stability." But in a matter of months, a revolution threw the Shah out, and the United States had to face the radical (and anti-

American) Islamic Republic of Iran. In short, when the United States comes to the nuclear negotiating tables, whether in Vienna, Geneva or New York, it comes with a lot of baggage and its homilies are greeted with great skepticism not only by Iran, but by many countries who are signatories of the NPT.

This does not mean that attempts to stop Iran's nuclear activities are unworthy; an Iranian bomb would radically change the strategic environment in the Middle East and be a further nail in the coffin of the NPT. Furthermore, President Bush has made it clear the United States will not allow Iran to get nuclear weapons. Speaking at the White House on June 18, 2003, Bush stated, "the international community must come together to make it very clear to Iran that we will not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon." This is a clear statement of policy and cannot be fudged. The question is how will Bush and the Europeans implement an agreement with Iran that denies them the right to develop an independent fuel cycle? The answer is that they will fail unless Iran's leaders and its public are convinced a deal is worth their while.

No agreement between the United States and Iran on the nuclear question is possible unless two fundamental changes occur. First, there must be an Iranian leadership that is prepared to negotiate with the United States about the fundamental problems with the bilateral relationship. Second, the Bush Administration has to be prepared to negotiate on these issues with a regime many of its policymakers and supporters wish to get rid of altogether.

Aside from a broad band "grand bargain" U.S.-Iranian settlement, what are the near term options on the issue? A joint U.S.-EU decision to take Iran to the Security Council because of its violations of its NPT agreements could have a compelling impact on Iran, provided Russia, China and the other UN Security Council members supported it and important countries such as Japan agreed to end economic ties to Tehran. Under these circumstances, Iran's leaders might blink, especially if other Middle East developments were, from its perspective, going in the wrong direction. This could include an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, an end of Syrian occupation of Lebanon, the disarmament of Hizballah, and the emergence of a democratic pro-American Iraq. But these are a lot of "ifs." Iran would have to be found in clear, unequivocal violation of the NPT to get support from the majority of the Security Council. So far the Iranians have been too clever to allow this to happen. Russia and China both have growing economic

stakes in Iran and regard the Iranian government as a friendly power. These interests will only grow in the coming years, especially given China's insatiable need for petroleum to meet the needs of its burgeoning, car-owning middle class.

The other alternative is the use of force. A massive military assault by the United States on Iran's nuclear infrastructure could cause significant damage to the nuclear program and could have negative fallout for the conservative autocrats, who are disliked by the population, and who would be seen to have grossly mishandled relations to the point where Iran had become a target of U.S. military actions. This option would have to assume that the United States had no choice but to declare war on Iran, for this is what it would be. Such an act would be unanimously condemned, including by the Bush Administration's closest ally, Britain. Given the farce over U.S. intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, proving that Iran has the bomb will be very difficult unless Iran obliges by doing something reckless and out of character, such as testing a nuclear device. There is a strong likelihood that while a military campaign against Iran would cause great damage, the net effect would be to reinforce Iran's determination to get nuclear weapons.

If these options are unlikely to work, what are the prospects of a political agreement that provides enough incentives on both sides to take it seriously? This will only happen if pragmatic, as opposed to ideological, conservatives emerge as decisive power players in Iran's June 2005 presidential elections. Could a leader such as former president Rafsanjani contemplate such a deal? Could he sell it to his theocratic friends? Would the Bush Administration be willing to negotiate with such a man and such a regime? For the United States, the bottom line would have to be the end of Iran's nuclear weapons program, the end of terrorism against Israel and cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan. For Iran it would mean the end of U.S. economic sanctions and the acceptance of the Islamic Republic as a legitimate player in the region. It might be difficult to persuade the US Congress to take these steps, especially if other trends in the Middle East were positive. Likewise, the Iranian security establishment will be highly suspicious of any deal with the Great Satan. Like their brethren in the former Soviet Union and present day China, they are invariably suspicious of the United States and, by and large, have not traveled outside of their country. Their attitudes are very different of those of the Iranian bureaucrats who are well aware that Iran needs access to the

world market and more engagement with the United States to solve its long-term economic problems. The security establishment, on the other hand, benefits from the confrontation with the United States, getting abundant money to pursue many programs, including a nuclear program.

So all of these signs are cause for pessimism. If, for whatever reason, a radical new approach (on the part of both Washington and Teheran) is out of the question, the best the administration can hope for is that we prepare for the coming crisis jointly with the Europeans as allies—rather than at loggerheads. In the face of Euro-Atlantic solidarity, there is a chance that the Iranians will be prepared to fudge the program for a few more years. But ultimately, there is no way that the United States, Europe or the UN Security Council can stop a proud country of 70 million people with abundant resources from getting the ingredients for a nuclear bomb if that is what its leaders believe must happen. For this reason, it would be prudent to engage in a substantive dialogue with other allies and friends, especially the Gulf countries, about what to do if the Iranian bomb becomes a reality and a pre-emptive war with Iran is an unacceptable option.

Most importantly, the US and Europe must bite the bullet and agree with each other on a common strategy that is unambiguous as to the limits of carrots and sticks both parties are prepared to present to Iran's leaders and the international community. In other words, the US and Europe need to draw up a "Roadmap" to establish clear responses to specific Iranian actions such as Iranian conversion of hexafluoride gas or resumption of the uranium enrichment programs. The key must be to prevent Iran from driving a wedge between the US and Europe.

Geoffrey Kemp is the Director of Regional Strategic Programs at The Nixon Center. He served in the first Reagan Administration as Senior Director for Near East and South Asia on the National Security Council Staff. This testimony is adapted from an essay that will appear in the Summer 2005 issue of The National Interest.