

Plan B for Iran: What If Nuclear Diplomacy Fails?

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**A Report Based on a Workshop
Hosted by
The Preventive Defense Project
Harvard and Stanford Universities**

SUMMARY

The Preventive Defense Project conducted the latest in its series of Washington WMD Workshops entitled “Iran Plan B Design” on May 22, 2006. The purpose of the Workshop was to collect the best thinking on the design of a plan for dealing with Iran’s nuclear program should diplomacy fail and the Iranians continue on the path to nuclear capability. (At the time of the Workshop, diplomacy centered on the EU3-led process with the U.S. in the background; the U.S. has since agreed to join the talks directly, though Iran has rejected the condition that it cease uranium enrichment in advance of the talks.)

While it is important for the United States and its international partners to design Plan B now, it is premature to abandon the current diplomatic course, Plan A. For one thing, Iran’s known nuclear program is several years away from being able to produce its first bomb’s worth of fissile material. Unlike the case of North Korea which has already obtained fissile material and is producing more, there is time to let diplomacy with Iran play out. Second, and again unlike North Korea, the Iranian government has exhibited at least a smidgen of sensitivity to international opinion and to the possibility of further isolation and punishment if it persists, and acceptance and trade if it stops – i.e., to diplomatic carrots and sticks. Third, while the cat-and-mouse diplomacy led by the EU3 has not led to conclusive results, it has caused Iran to slow the progress of its uranium enrichment program through intermittent suspensions. It is not yet time to switch to Plan B. But it is time to devise Plan B. And the time available for diplomacy is only valuable if it is used effectively.

The Workshop addressed three distinct versions of Plan B.

Plan B1 would add direct U.S.-Iran contact to the EU3-led diplomacy the U.S. has supported from the sidelines for several years. Plan B1 was suggested by a number of influential observers and leaders – Republican, Democratic, and foreign – in the weeks before the Workshop. Shortly after the Workshop, the Bush administration adopted a version of Plan B1.

Plan B2 would use coercion to obtain the outcome that Plan A and Plan B1 seek –

a non-nuclear Iran. Coercion is the political, economic, and military pressure that the U.S. and other nations can bring to bear on Iran in an attempt to discourage or physically delay it from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Plan B3 prescribes what the United States should do if Iran succeeds in going nuclear and the U.S. needs to make strategic adjustments to protect itself and its friends from a nuclear Iran. Strategic adjustment requires the U.S. to develop a long-term strategy to respond to Iranian possession of nuclear weapons if diplomacy and coercion fail.

The Workshop participants were a select group of leading, experienced American thinkers and strategists on national security, Middle Eastern affairs, and nuclear weapons. All of the participants have been working actively on either Plan A, Plan B (in various versions), or both. The Workshop was off-the-record, and this report accordingly attributes no statement to a particular participant. Given the sensitivity of the subject – explicit exploration of alternatives to current U.S. policy – the Preventive Defense Project did not urge current U.S. government policymakers to join directly in the Design Workshop discussions. Briefings of this report are being held for key members of the administration and Congress – who will need a Plan B if and when that moment comes. The Iran Plan B Design Workshop is the fifth in a series of WMD-related activities of the Preventive Defense Project. Other Workshops and related publications and Congressional testimony in this series have concerned – Improving U.S. WMD Intelligence

- Updating the NPT Regime
- Plan B for North Korea, and
- the U.S.-India Nuclear Deal.

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PLAN B1: DIRECT U.S.-IRAN CONTACT

The idea of direct U.S.-Iran talks (bilateral or multilateral) over the nuclear issue and other matters of concern to both sides was broached by a growing number of influential U.S. and non-U.S. figures in the spring of 2006: Senators Richard Lugar, Chuck Hagel, Christopher Dodd, and John McCain, as well as Henry Kissinger, Madeleine Albright, Samuel Berger, former Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, and reportedly German Chancellor Angela Merkel.¹ In

¹ Senator Lugar: “I think that [holding direct talks with Iran] would be useful...The Iranians are a part of the energy picture...We need to talk about that...Furthermore we have an agenda with Iran to talk about as far as their interference in Iraq.”

- Comments on ABC News *This Week*, 16 April 2006.

Senator Hagel: “Allies of the U.S. will support tough action against Iran only if they are confident

America is serious about achieving a negotiated, diplomatic solution. The continued unwillingness of the U.S. to engage Iran will make other states hesitate to support, and possibly oppose, these tougher measures... The U.S. should engage Iran directly with an agenda open to all areas of agreement and disagreement. It is only through this difficult diplomatic process that a pathway towards resolution and accommodation can be built, putting the U.S. and Iran, the Middle East and our allies in a position to defuse a potential Middle East conflagration and world calamity... The U.S., in partnership with our allies, should work towards a package of issues for discussion with Iran. This is not negotiation. That comes later. Ultimately, any resolution will most likely require security assurances for Iran.”

- Chuck Hagel, “America must use a wide lens for its strategy on Iran,”
Financial Times, 8 May 2004, 11.

Senator Dodd: “I happen to believe you need direct talks. It doesn't mean you agree with [the Iranians].... But there's an option.”

- Comments on *Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace*, 17 April 2006.

Senator McCain: “There has to be some kind of glimmer of hope or optimism before we sit down and give them that kind of legitimacy / it's an option that you probably have to consider.”

- Comments on *CBS Face the Nation*, 7 May 2006.

Henry Kissinger: “On a matter so directly involving its security, the United States should not negotiate through proxies, however closely allied. If America is prepared to negotiate with North Korea over proliferation in the six-party forum, and with Iran in Baghdad over Iraqi security, it must be possible to devise a multilateral venue for nuclear talks with Tehran that would permit the United States to participate—especially in light of what is at stake.”

- Henry Kissinger, “A Nuclear Test for Diplomacy,”
Washington Post, 16 May 2006, A17.

Madeleine Albright et al: “We believe that the Bush administration should pursue a policy it has shunned for many years: attempt to negotiate directly with Iranian leaders about their nuclear program... Government leaders in Europe, Russia and Asia also believe that direct talks between Washington and Tehran could prove more fruitful now that the European and Russian-Iranian engagements on Iran's nuclear program have made some progress in communicating mutual positions and concerns. Accordingly, we call on the U.S. administration, hopefully with the support of the trans-Atlantic community, to take the bold step of opening a direct dialogue with the Iranian government on the issue of Iran's nuclear program.

- Madeleine Albright, Joschka Fischer, Jozias van Aartsen, Bronislaw Geremek, Hubert Védrine and Lydia Polfer, “Talk to Iran, President Bush,”
International Herald Tribune, 26 April 2006.

Samuel Berger: “Another course is possible, one that is more likely to prevent a military confrontation or, if it nonetheless becomes unavoidable, less likely to produce such dangerous aftershocks. The U.S. should sit down with those who share a sense of danger—including, first and foremost, the European Union, Russia, and China—and explain that we are prepared for a bold diplomatic move toward Tehran if our allies are ready in exchange to impose tough sanctions on Iran should it reject a reasonable offer. Once that agreement has been secured, we should probably announce our readiness to negotiate with Iran on all issues of mutual concern: its nuclear program, to be sure, but also its support for militant groups, its posture towards the Middle East peace process, the future of Iraq and, on their side, the removal of our sanctions, Iran's integration into the global community and U.S. assurances of noninterference and security

May, Iranian President Ahmadinejad sent a lengthy letter to President Bush making clear his willingness to enter such talks, and soon after Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei added his decisive voice in support.

In the wake of these calls (and the week after the Preventive Defense Workshop), President Bush decided to pursue one version of Plan B1: to have the United States join but not supplant the EU3 talks, with the condition that Iran restore its freeze on uranium enrichment, and with an agenda apparently confined to Iran's nuclear program but encompassing other issues of mutual concern.

The policy change to direct talks is controversial, since widely different views of the ultimate outcome of such talks are held by different observers, all with some logic to support them:

View 1: Direct talks are the only way to test whether there can be a breakthrough in U.S.-Iran relations including the nuclear issue – if such a breakthrough is possible.

View 2: Direct talks conditioned on a freeze in Iran's uranium enrichment will buy further time before Iran can produce the bomb, which is valuable in itself.

View 3: Direct talks will effectively prepare the way for coercion, since coercion

guarantees."

- Samuel Berger, "Talk to Iran,"

The Wall Street Journal, 8 May 2004, A19.

Dennis Ross: "Why not have the president go to his British, French and German counterparts and say: We will join you at the table with the Iranians, but first let us agree on an extensive set of meaningful – not marginal – economic and political sanctions that we will impose if the negotiations fail. Any such agreement would also need to entail an understanding of what would constitute failure in the talks and the trigger for the sanctions."

- Dennis Ross, "A New Strategy on Iran," *Washington Post*, 1 May 2006, A19.

U.N. Secretary General Annan: "I think it would be good if the U.S. were to be at the table with the Europeans, the Iranians, the Russians to try and work this out. If everybody, all the stakeholders and the key players, were around the table, I think it would be possible to work out a package that will satisfy the concerns of everybody."

- Comments on PBS *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, 4 May 2006.

U.N. Secretary General Annan: "I really believe that as long as the Iranians have the sense they are negotiating with the Europeans ... and what they discuss with them will have to be discussed with the Americans and then [brought] back again to them..., they will not put everything on the table"

- Comments at Vienna Summit, 12 May 2006.

Angela Merkel asked the U.S. to consider joining negotiations in private talks with Bush.

- According to Ruprecht Polenz, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the German parliament <usatoday.com> (cited 11 May 2006).

can only be effective with international support and the U.S. can only win that support after it has shown that its best efforts at diplomacy have been tried and failed. (A contrary view is that direct talks legitimize the Iranian regime in international opinion, which will make resort to coercion more difficult even if the talks fail due to Iranian intransigence.)

View 4: Direct talks play into Iranian hands, since the Iraq war has strengthened Iranian/Shiite influence in the Middle East, the U.S. administration is divided within itself and cannot negotiate shrewdly, and the Iranian government has so many factions that it cannot deliver on a real deal anyway.

A strategy for direct talks must answer the following questions:

How? Possibilities discussed were to hold bilateral U.S.-Iran talks, to have the U.S. join the EU3 talks (the choice of the Bush administration), or to convene an Iran version of the North Korea 6-Party-talks (U.S., EU3, Russia, China, Iran).

About what? The Bush administration needs to decide whether all issues of concern to the U.S. and Iran will be on the table when it sits down with Iran for direct talks, including Iranian support for terrorism, bilateral relations, regional and global security, and economic and diplomatic relations. At the other extreme would be an agenda focused solely on Iran's nuclear program. An in-between option would be a theme of "the future of nuclear power worldwide," in which Iran's case would be treated as an example of the wider problem of avoiding a future in which proliferation of uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing does not occur in tandem with the needed spread of civil nuclear power plants. Some argue that no U.S. administration can make a deal with Iran that covers only the nuclear issue and omits Iranian support for terrorism. But others warn that putting terrorism on the agenda will cause an entirely new faction to be added to the Iranian negotiating team – pro-terrorism constituencies in the Iranian leadership – that will only make it more difficult to get a deal stopping the nuclear program. And broadening the agenda will bring in the views of Europe, Russia, and China on all those other issues. Consensus among the U.S. negotiating partners is difficult enough to achieve with an agenda restricted to the nuclear issue.

With whom? A faction-ridden, protean government like Iran's raises the question of whom the U.S. can make a deal with. While Supreme Leader Khamenei supports direct talks, and President Ahmadinejad's letter to President Bush clearly expressed a wish for direct contact, factionalism will probably be evident whenever specific commitments need to be made by Iran in the negotiations.

Under what conditions? Two types of conditions for the U.S. to join in direct talks must be addressed: American conditions on Iran, and American conditions on the EU3, Russia and China. Many Workshop participants believed that the U.S. administration cannot be seen to be holding talks with Iran while the centrifuges are spinning at Natanz: a suspension of enrichment and return to inspections are necessary prerequisites (the Bush administration has imposed these conditions). The condition on the other negotiating parties is just as important and can be summarized as "together on the downward path as

well as the upward path” – i.e., the EU3, Russia, and China must be committed in advance to penalize Iran if the direct talks fail as well as being committed to reward Iran if it agrees to curb its nuclear program.

PLAN B2: COERCION

Coercion can be political, economic, or military. One Workshop participant suggested that since Shiism celebrates self-inflicted pain, coercion of any sort will be ineffective in dealing with Iran. But presumably any Iranian government must weigh penalties and gains that result from its policies, and eventually be held to account by the Iranian people.

Diplomacy and coercion should be mutually reinforcing. A vivid depiction of a coercive Plan B2 in the event of failed diplomacy is part of the “stick” that might persuade the Iranian regime to accept a diplomatic outcome, and thus a credible Plan B2 is necessary to diplomacy. Conversely, credible diplomacy is a necessary prelude to any coercive Plan B2, since political and economic coercion (if not military) cannot be fully effective without some measure of support from the EU3, Russia, China, and Iran’s neighbors, and these other nations will not give their support unless diplomacy has been tried and been shown to have failed. A complete U.S. policy at this time should therefore logically consist of multiple plans being developed at the same time, with diplomacy implemented first and coercion (or strategic adjustment) resorted to if and when diplomacy fails.

The U.S. administration has been divided between proponents of diplomacy (Plan A or B1) and proponents of coercion (Plan B2) – with some apparently fatalistically resigned to making strategic adjustments to an Iranian bomb (Plan B3). These factions seem not to recognize that diplomacy and coercion need to be seen as a sequence unfolding over time, not a choice to be made at this time. This artificial division has paralyzed the U.S. administration.

When should we move from diplomacy to coercion? What are the triggers for coercion? That is, at what point should the U.S. withdraw from talks and seek the same result it seeks from diplomacy – a non-nuclear Iran – through other means? Iran has already crossed a “redline” of commencing enrichment with impunity. Participants discussed various triggers for a move to Plan B2:

- commencement of “large-scale” enrichment,
- withdrawal from the NPT and its inspection regime,
- failure to suspend enrichment and begin direct talks after a specified period of time,
- failure of the talks to produce agreement after a specified period of time, or
- failure of Europe, Russia, and China to support sufficiently strong action against Iran in the U.N. Security Council after the talks have reached an impasse.

Political pressure would be intended to isolate, downgrade, and expel Iran's government from all manner of international fora and contacts, while simultaneously extending an open hand to the Iranian people. In theory, this pressure would either change the mind of the Iranian regime about nuclear weapons, or at the extreme change the regime itself. On the one hand, the Iranian people seem currently to dislike their government and to be open to western influence, which weighs in favor of the application of political pressure. On the other hand, Iranians have experienced one revolution in their recent history and don't relish another; and the nuclear program is broadly popular as a reflection of Iran's new role in the region and its proud Persian heritage. Workshop participants were accordingly uncertain whether political pressure would actually "split the government from the people" or, on the contrary, would provide a rallying point for the government.

In the face of this fundamental uncertainty, the State Department's \$85 million effort to promote democracy, aid Iranian dissidents, and provide western information sources in Iran could either be helpful or backfire dangerously. And whether the effect of this program to undermine the mullahs is positive or negative, its magnitude is tiny in comparison to the \$55 billion being paid by world consumers of oil at high prices into the coffers of the Iranian leadership in 2006.

At the international level, possible measures to apply political pressure include reduction in bilateral diplomatic contacts, visa/travel bans on Iranian officials and persons associated with the nuclear program, freezing of assets of these same categories of individuals, restriction of air travel in and out of Iran, withdrawal of support for Iran's WTO membership, and disqualification of Iranian teams from international sporting events.

Economic pressure would have the same objective as political pressure – to change the regime or its mind dramatically by curtailing Iran's economic relations with the rest of the world and frustrating its people's wish for a better life. Iran's economic vulnerability is great: unemployment is running at more than 12% (higher among the young, a million of whom compete each year for half that number of jobs when they come of workforce age), inflation is 13%, interest rates are 25-30%, 40% of the population is classified by international standards as living in poverty, and an estimated 6% of the population is addicted to heroin.

The United States cannot by itself add much to Iran's economic pressures. Current U.S. law (the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act and other laws) essentially forbids trade and investment in Iran. The only exceptions are imports from Iran of nuts, caviar, carpets, and Iranian oil refined in third countries; and exports to Iran of agricultural and medical supplies (which are given interagency review). Iran may not receive U.S. loans or credit, or obtain assistance from multilateral development banks using U.S. contributions. U.S. law also penalizes foreign companies that invest in Iran's energy sector. The U.S. also continues to hold Iranian assets frozen since the Revolution. In other words, the United States has long been doing almost everything it can do to pressure Iran's economy.

Economic coercion must therefore be backed by Europe (which provides 40% of Iran's imports), Russia, China, and Japan to be effective. U.N. sanctions would encompass all nations trading with Iran. In theory other nations could impose blanket sanctions like the U.S. already has, but this is unlikely. Instead, the parties have discussed lesser measures like restrictions on trade with entities involved in the Iranian nuclear program or other selected sectors, an arms embargo, and an embargo on sales of refined oil products (Iran imports 33% of its gasoline). Probably the most consequential form of economic coercion would be a general freeze on the assets of Iranian financial institutions.

An embargo on Iranian oil sales has not been threatened. A cutoff of Iranian oil exports would be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, Iran's production of 2.5 million barrels of oil per day exceeds the excess capacity of other suppliers, so stopping its exports would result in a global shortage of oil in the near term, with resultant price spike. On the other hand, Iran's oil earnings of \$55 billion this year account for 85% of the country's exports and 65% of the government's income, so a cutoff would cripple the regime and the country's economy.

According to Workshop participants, economic pressure of the kinds foreseen in current negotiations would have two effects, an immediate psychological impact and a longer-term economic impact. Psychologically, the Iranian people would immediately feel their future prospects constricted through the actions of their government in the matter of the nuclear program. But the actual economic effects of international sanctions would build more slowly – several years in the views of some Workshop participants. Several years of delay would be too long if uranium enrichment were underway during this period. This difference between the timescale on which an Iranian bomb becomes inevitable and the timescale on which economic sanctions have their full effect suggests that economic pressure is an uncertain tool of a coercive policy.

Military pressure has been much debated in public. The simplest concept is for the United States to mount air strikes on the *known* facilities that make up the Iranian nuclear power infrastructure: the centrifuge facility at Natanz, centrifuge production plants, uranium conversion facilities at Esfahan, heavy water reactor activities at Arak and elsewhere, the Bushehr power reactors, and other parts of the known program. (In addition, there would probably need to be some suppression of air defenses.) Obviously elements of the *unknown*, or covert, program could not be bombed or assaulted by special forces. Such unknown facilities probably exist: after all, facilities that are now "known," like Natanz, were not known until 2001.

Destroying the known program would be effective in delaying the Iranian bomb if the known program is on a faster track to the bomb than the unknown program. If, on the other hand, the unknown facilities are closer to producing fissile materials and bombs than the known facilities, eliminating the known facilities would not delay Iranian achievement of nuclear capability. Most Workshop participants judged that the known program was ahead of, and not behind, the unknown program. Thus attacking the known facilities would delay an Iranian bomb.

Delay...but not prevent.... In the aftermath of the destruction of its known facilities, Iran would probably try to hide or deeply bury its entire program, throw out international inspectors, and press ahead at full speed. A single airstrike would therefore have an important delaying effect, but to continue to prevent Iran from obtaining the bomb, the U.S. would need to make repeated attacks whenever it discovered hidden facilities.

How much time would a single attack buy? Suppose that the decision to break off talks and attack the known Iranian nuclear program was based on an intelligence assessment that after talks ended the Iranians would go full-bore at the known facilities and would have a bomb in four years; that dragging out the doomed talks would only delay achievement of a bomb by an additional two years (for a total of six); and that after destruction of the known facilities Iran could rebuild its nuclear program to its pre-attack status within two years in the absence of follow-on strikes. In this case, mounting a single airstrike would offer no advantage over prolonging talks – even with the knowledge that the talks would eventually fail. As another example, if rebuilding its facilities to the pre-attack level took Iran four years, the attack would result in a net delay of two years. In reality no such precision in intelligence is likely. Advocates of a single airstrike would still need to do the arithmetic on the benefit of such an isolated action. Unless the delaying effect of a single strike can be shown to be significant, repeated strikes over years would be required to keep pushing back the date when Iran could obtain the bomb. Even repeated strikes might prove ineffective if Iran buries, hides, disperses, and defends its rebuilt program. It is difficult to see how a single attack mounted on Natanz at this time, when the enrichment “pilot plant” is only beginning operation, could buy more than three or four years at most.

The repercussions of a U.S. attack on Iran’s known nuclear facilities under current circumstances would be severe. If military coercion were not preceded by a robust diplomacy that demonstrably failed through Iran’s fault and not in any way U.S. fault, the U.S. will be isolated internationally. The Iranian people would likely rally behind their government in the aftermath of an attack on their country, whatever the U.S. justification or level of international support. Additionally, Iran could react in several ways:

- Direct retaliation against U.S. targets in the region (including forces deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere).
- Attack on Israel, directly via Iranian medium-range missiles like the Shahab 3, or indirectly via shorter-range rockets launched from southern Lebanon.
- Terrorism via Hezbollah and other Iranian-trained groups that have not targeted the U.S. directly in recent years.
- Interruption of Iranian oil supplies. This reaction would be a two-edged sword for Iran, however, as noted above.
- Interruption of Gulf oil shipping. Iran’s military could also attempt to harass shipping with submarines, mines, small surface vessels, and land-based antiship missiles.

To deter retaliation, the United States would therefore need to withhold attack on some categories of targets not associated with the nuclear program (military and leadership headquarters and command and control, naval and missile facilities that could participate in retaliatory actions, etc.), threatening to attack them if Iran retaliated. An important escalatory step by the U.S. would be to destroy Iran's oil infrastructure, ending the regime's \$55 billion revenue stream. Controlling escalation implies restricting the strikes in the first place: the most parsimonious approach would be to announce to Iran and its people that the strikes were strictly limited to the nuclear program (and needed air defense suppression), that the program and not the country as a whole was under attack, and that no further strikes would follow if Iran did not retaliate and the nuclear program did not reappear. On the other hand, having borne the risk of one strike, the U.S. should make clear its intention to return again and again whenever it found evidence of continuing nuclear activities.

Some Workshop participants noted the importance of targeting Iranian nuclear scientists as well as facilities, implying strikes during working hours or on residential complexes known to house such scientists. At Bushehr and other locations, Russian and other foreign workers would likely be victims of such strikes. Others suggested that the best time to attack Natanz would be several years from now, when more centrifuges were assembled and more could therefore be destroyed.

PLAN B3: STRATEGIC ADJUSTMENTS

What if all else fails and Iran goes nuclear? In that case the U.S. will need to make profound adjustments to its security policy – adjustments that are truly strategic in scope. Like the specter of coercive actions by the U.S., the specter of these strategic adjustments should be made visible to Iran, and also to Europe, Russia, China, and the entire Middle East since all will feel these adjustments.

The strategic adjustments that will be needed if Iran goes nuclear follow from the three strategic problems an Iranian bomb will pose: use, diversion, and possession.

First, the possibility of Iran's use of the bomb against the U.S., U.S. forces in the region, or its neighbors including Israel poses a new and profound threat that must be countered.

Second, diversion of Iran's bomb to other parties via direct transfer to terrorist groups like Hezbollah, black market sale by corrupt scientists like an Iranian A.Q. Khan, seizure by extremist factions of the Iranian government, or loss of control in a new Iranian revolution are all eminently plausible and totally fearsome dangers.

Third, possession of nukes will, as a simple fact, give Iran a shield behind which it will be emboldened to try to extend its sway in the Middle East, export extremism, and support terrorism. Iran's success in getting the bomb with impunity might also give encouragement to others seeking the bomb, and its possession of the bomb could compel its neighbors (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, even Iraq in the future) to conclude that they

must have the bomb.

Use. With respect to use, the U.S. and its friends will need to resort to the classic remedies of deterrence, defense, and counterforce.

The U.S. has a strong deterrent in its general military supremacy and its strategic nuclear force. It could take the additional psychological step to strengthen deterrence of introducing tactical nuclear weapons into the region (on land in the form of bombs on tactical aircraft, if neighboring countries will permit; or at sea in the form of nuclear cruise missiles on submarines and bombs on carrier-based aircraft). It can extend deterrence by promising Israel and Sunni Arab states threatened by the Iranian bomb that the U.S. will protect them from attack.

Defense against most forms of delivery of an Iranian bomb is a daunting task, but against long-range intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) delivery the U.S. can add missile defense interceptor sites in eastern Europe (which lies along the great circle flight trajectory from Iran to U.S. targets) to those it already has deployed in California and Alaska to protect against North Korean missile attack. Within the region, sea-based short-range missile defenses could be deployed, although the geography of the region does not lend itself to effective protection from such defenses.

Counterforce means programming U.S. ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) to be capable of attacking known Iranian nuclear forces promptly if attack by them appears imminent.

Diversion. Against the threat of diversion of an Iranian bomb to terrorists, extremist factions, or an even more radical government than the current one, there is little protection. Constant surveillance and interdiction where possible would be necessary but not likely to be effective. Iran should be made aware, however, that if radiochemical forensic evidence proves that its arsenal was the source of an attack on the U.S. or American interests, the U.S. will retaliate directly against Iran.

Possession. The adverse repercussions of Iranian possession of the bomb – even if it doesn't use it or divert it to others – are profound and difficult to counter. Much depends on the character of the Iranian regime that possesses the bomb. At one extreme, success with its nuclear program might herald the triumph of extremism in Iran, strengthening the hand of hard-liners and even ushering in regimes that are worse. At the other extreme, a moderate successor regime intent on integration with the rest of the world might not brandish its arsenal threateningly nor inspire concern in its neighbors – or in the U.S. But assuming the regime that got the bomb was more or less like the ones that have led Iran since the Revolution, one should expect Iranian/Shiite assertiveness, greater scope for state-supported terrorism, more anti-Israeli activity, and periodic oil price shocks. Against this onslaught the U.S. will need to try to forge a counterweight among Sunni countries, who will need in turn to choose between appeasement and alignment with Washington. U.S. forces associated with such a policy of encirclement and containment of Iran could be “over the horizon” or based in the Gulf (including in Iraq on a continuing basis).

The nonproliferation regime will suffer a serious setback if the once-“unacceptable” Iranian bomb is, in fact, accepted. Israel will probably abandon its practice of nuclear “ambiguity” and openly brandish its arsenal as a deterrent. Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia (the latter perhaps aided by Pakistan) will feel the pressure to match the Shiite bomb in Iran with another Sunni bomb. Any chance of avoiding such a domino effect of proliferation would lie in a strong U.S.-led encirclement and containment.

CONCLUSION

The Preventive Defense Project is committed to seeking solutions to national and international security problems before they can grow into A-List threats. The Iranian nuclear program is certainly one of the era’s greatest challenges to Preventive Defense. While it is therefore important to analyze the full range of alternatives to diplomacy to prevent an Iranian nuclear breakout or adjust to the reality of a nuclear-armed Iran – as our Workshop and this report do – it would be premature for U.S. policy to move to alternative plans. Diplomacy with Iran over its nuclear program has been slow and fitful, its results meager, and its prospects for ultimate success arguable. But there is time. Iran is years away from producing its first uranium bomb. These conditions are very different from the case of North Korea, which is actively producing nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Additionally, the U.S. government has only recently decided to move from the background to the forefront of the diplomatic stage. Unless and until the diplomatic path has been exhausted, alternatives to diplomacy to stop the Iranian nuclear program should not be attempted, and are unlikely to succeed. Time is available, but this time is only valuable if the U.S. uses it effectively.