THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST: IS PROLIFERATION INEVITABLE?

SUMMARY OF A ROUNDTABLE
(Including Policy Recommendations)

HELD IN
NEW YORK CITY
April 29, 2009

POSTSCRIPT
November 2009
Our Mission

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit, activist organization dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the National Committee identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

American foreign policy interests include

- preserving and strengthening national security;
- supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, religious, and cultural pluralism;
- improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;
- advancing human rights;
- encouraging realistic arms-control agreements;
- curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons;
- promoting an open and global economy.

Believing that an informed public is vital to a democratic society, the National Committee offers educational programs that address security challenges facing the United States and publishes a variety of publications, including its bimonthly journal, American Foreign Policy Interests, that present keen analyses of all aspects of American foreign policy.
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Dear Reader:

When the title of the all-day roundtable that was to be held in New York City on April 29, 2009, was discussed, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) decided to address the technical issue of the proliferation of nuclear weapons within a broad political framework that could spark a multitude of questions and answers, both technical and theoretical. Accordingly the question “Is the proliferation of nuclear weapons inevitable in the Greater Middle East?” was posed and adopted as the title of this conference. As this summary of the conference suggests, “What might happen if Iran does not allow its nuclear sites to be inspected?” would have been an apt question and title too. In fact, one of the participants underscored the relevance of focusing on Iran by paraphrasing a remark made by Richard Holbrooke who said that when he became involved in negotiations centered on the Arab-Israeli conflict years ago, Iran was never mentioned; now it tops the list of states whose hard-line positions generate major concern over the issue.

Iran’s evident desire to play a dominant role in the Middle East fuels its drive to acquire nuclear weapons, for what reason other than a virulent case of anti-Semitism would cause mullahs from the former Persia to try to arrogate to themselves the right to champion a deadly solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which only the two parties can settle peacefully at the negotiating table? Appeals to the fabled Arab street may be hard for Iran to resist, but, as a presenter intimated, the street seems to lack the power to effect change that would conduce to Iran’s advantage in the region.

Although Iran is considered an enigma to some, none of the experts who presented papers and engaged in animated discussions at the conference can be numbered among that puzzled group. Not only did one of the presenters predict that the then forthcoming election on June 12 would be fraudulent, but he suggested the methodology that would be used to “elect” the defeated president, why the elite might commit electoral fraud that could be detected so easily, the kind of repressive action that would be taken against the so-called losers should they have the effrontery to complain, and the effects that the stolen election would have on the credibility of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Many other questions can be raised regarding the violation of human rights in Iran, infighting among the elite that has tainted the supreme guide and made him seem to be little more than one combatant among the elite that is waging ideological war against one another, and the uses to which Iran
will inevitably put its nuclear materials produced for military purposes unless it is stopped from carrying out its plan to obtain hegemony in the region.

Perhaps another conference of a similar title will be held next year to discuss one such question. If so, the contents if not the title is certain to connote the perverse actions of Iran. Meanwhile, though offering no cause for optimism, the answers given by the experts provide assurance that nuclear proliferation is not inevitable. Reinforcing that assurance is the grand diplomatic return of the United States to the region and its commitment to match deceitful deeds with tough sanctions and reduce U.S. nuclear weapons arsenals in consort with Russia. A small start toward achieving nonproliferation, it can be said, has been made.

A list of policy recommendations formulated by the NCAFP appears at the end of the summary.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy thanks all of the presenters and the other participants as well. Their informed and provocative remarks sparked almost instantaneous and continuous debate.

The NCAFP is especially grateful to Mutual of America; Mrs. Sheila Johnson Robbins; Mrs. Eugenie Fromer; Kenneth J. Bialkin, Esq.; and the George D. Schwab Family Fund for providing support for this roundtable.

Sincerely,

George D. Schwab
President
A participant suggested that an intuitively correct answer to the question that animated this all-day roundtable: “Is nuclear proliferation inevitable in the Greater Middle East?” could be inferred by answering three aspects of the overall question: (1) the plausibility of Iran’s denial that it is enriching uranium in order to produce nuclear materials for military use; (2) the U.S.-international relationship that has evolved from attempting to deal with the issue; (3) the U.S.-Iranian relationship, including the Iranian and Israeli perceptions of that relationship. Based on responses to those questions, some would answer yes, whereas others would reply no to the overarching question. In essence, it seems clear, attempts to answer the question are centered on Iran.

A presenter, whose presentation reflected the Arab point of view augmented by an extensive knowledge of American foreign policy, began the discussion by posing the question that every participant proved eager to answer: “Does anyone here believe that the uranium that the Iranians are enriching is meant for nonmilitary purposes?” That question precipitated a response posed in the form of a question: “Do you?” The unequivocal answer, no, was voiced for the second time.

After both the presenter and the participant rendered the same judgment, other participants spoke up and registered a resounding no to the question. That response led the presenter to illuminate the Iranian thinking that appears to inform its behavior. According to the analysis presented, Iran has concluded that the possession of nuclear weapons will enhance its sovereignty, as well as its power and aspirations in the region. Its geostrategic position, the presenter maintained, has already been strengthened by the weakening of neighboring Iraq caused by the war and the removal of the dictator, Saddam Hussein, as well as by Hamas’s domination of the Palestinians, Hezbollah’s acting as a state within a state in Lebanon, and Syria’s collaboration with Hezbollah in Lebanon, prompting Turkey, a member of NATO, to question its own influence and power in the region.

Moreover, the presenter reminded the other participants of Iran’s contention that it does not need to obtain the permission of the international community to generate nuclear power for peaceful purposes. Citing nuclear agreements between Abu Dhabi and the United States and between Egypt and France, the presenter maintained that although proliferation abounds in the region, not all of the nuclear materials produced at reactor sites are intended for military purposes. Based on the agreement that Russia and Iran have entered into, Russia is supplying low-
density uranium in the form of fuel to the Bushehr plant, which the Islamic Republic is said to be using for nonmilitary purposes such as generating electricity. The presenter added that no state has argued that Iran is not entitled to possess nuclear materials for peaceful purposes, and the widespread acceptance of the Russian sale of nuclear materials to be used at the Bushehr reactor that it has constructed testifies to that fact. Whatever their purpose, however, all such agreements tend to accelerate the arms race. Having acquiesced in Iran’s development of nuclear materials, the United States, the Europeans, and others cannot without provoking hostility deny the same right to the Arab states in the region.

Iran’s refusal to grant inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) the right to inspect all of its nuclear facilities—the way in which Iran’s production of centrifuges designed to produce enriched uranium destined for the production of nuclear weapons was confirmed as its covert construction of a reactor was progressing at Natanz in 2002—as well as its acknowledgment that it is continuing to enrich uranium that it claims won’t be used to produce nuclear weapons—has reinforced the suspicion that nuclear weapons of mass destruction, not energy produced for peaceful purposes, are the intended products of the nuclear-enrichment program in contemporary Iran.

The mention of undisclosed nuclear weapons and motives led one participant to name what others seemed reluctant to identify as “the Jewish bomb.” That term alone provoked a spirited discussion about two interrelated subjects: what Israel might do to prevent the Islamic Republic from producing nuclear weapons as a result of realizing a breakout in the uranium-enrichment process, as well as the ambiguity implicit in Russia’s projected relationship with a nuclear weapons possessing Iran that may or may not influence Russia’s willingness to impose tough sanctions on Iran for violating international law.

Also discussed were Israel’s probable response to the reaction of the Group of Five Plus One, especially the U.S. reaction, to the imminent prospect of Iran’s becoming an overt nuclear power. In the presenter’s judgment, Britain, France, and Germany, U.S. allies that are already engaged in trying to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region, would welcome the new administration’s response to Iran if it is credible. Europe’s endorsement of President Obama’s declaration that he is willing to engage with Iran gives Britain, France, and Germany the support that they need to sustain the leadership role that they assumed during the Bush administration in order to deal with Iran’s aspirations to become a nuclear power and the
most influential state in the Middle East.

A discussion of the West’s reaction to Iran’s denial that it is on the verge of possessing nuclear weapons prompted a participant to relate the apparent shift that has occurred in China’s attitude toward North Korea. Initially Chinese leaders discussed their concern about North Korea’s flaunting of its possession of nuclear weapons and the destabilizing effects that would inevitably produce in the Korean Peninsula. Then after the North Koreans tested their failed weapons, Chinese leaders backed away from supporting the imposition of harsh sanctions on the North and intimated that they no longer thought the implosion of North Korea was imminent. They suggested that they could learn to live with a neighbor that possessed nuclear weapons for military purposes, for, they maintained, there was nothing that could be done about the situation. The participant asked the presenter whether Iran’s neighbors were expressing a reaction similar to China’s. The presenter said yes and expanded on the answer to discuss the consequences of deterrence and credibility.

After a participant cited Japan’s plans to possess nuclear weapons for military purposes, another participant pointed out that Japan has assumed the obligation to subject its weapons and the sites that produce them to all of the inspections, restrictions, and safeguards required by international law. Moreover, neighbors in the region do not oppose the Japanese nuclear program designed for military purposes. Consequently, it can be inferred from the case of Japan’s relationships with its Asian neighbors, in contrast to that of Iran and its Middle Eastern neighbors, that trust characterizes the attitude of the states that have acquiesced in or agreed to a neighboring state’s acquisition of nuclear weapons because they believe that it will act transparently, legally, and responsibly and that the weapons would be used only to deter a would-be aggressor or for other defensive purposes.

In contrast, Russia’s apparent lack of trust in a country for which it is ostensibly supplying nuclear materials for peaceful purposes has sparked speculation about what Russia will do if evidence eventually reveals deception on the part of its nuclear beneficiary. Will it support the decisions of the other members of the Group of Five Plus One if they conclude that they must impose tough sanctions on Iran because it is using its enriched uranium program to produce nuclear weapons? Beyond stating that it won’t allow Iran to produce its own nuclear weapons, Russia has not been forthcoming about whether it will support the imposition of countermeasures designed to thwart Iran’s ambition. By simply saying that it would not allow Iran to do something that the Iranians seem determined to
do, the Russians have offered no clue about whether their response would be definitive and designed to be effective.

References to the Jewish bomb also provoked the specter of the Syrian bomb, which is no longer mentioned as an operational force in the international community perhaps because the reactor that might one day have produced nuclear material no longer exists. Evidently no one, including the Syrians, wants to discuss the relatively brief existence of the reactor or the manner of its demise (damaged in an Israeli strike and bulldozed into oblivion by the Syrians). Will the Iranian nuclear facilities be taken out, one participant asked rhetorically, leading the presenter to begin to answer the question by discussing the possible Israeli and U.S. responses to the possibly imminent disclosure of Iran’s suspected nuclear weapons program.

Israel, the presenter suggested, would prefer to act alone to destroy the Iranian nuclear weapons producing facility. At least one other participant agreed with that perception. The exploration of a scenario involving the American reaction to the Iranian threat implicit in its capacity to produce nuclear weapons provoked a discussion about U.S.-Israeli perceptions of each other’s reactions to Iran’s illicit production of weapons of mass destruction. Whereas the Bush administration claimed that it told Israel that bombing Iran’s nuclear weapons producing site or sites was “not a good idea,” Israel heard the U.S. assessment as “don’t do it.”

In any event, the issue of using force versus engaging in negotiations is evident in the telling difference between the Arab street, which demands that Israel be called to military account for its behavior in the territory claimed by the Palestinians, and the Arab elite, which appears to support negotiations, including the two-state solution; maintaining a balance of power in the region; and preventing an arms race in the Middle East. Iran, using the techniques of poaching and confiscation, has claimed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as one that it is uniquely qualified and situated to confront. In supporting Iran’s demands, the Arab street is perhaps subscribing to the notion that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It can be inferred, however, that holding the Iranians close may be a step too near for the Arab elite, who remains skeptical about Iran’s motives. There can be little doubt that the Arab elite values stability in the region over the export of fundamentalist revolution or theology.

In response to being asked to identify the conditions under which Israel might attempt to destroy the Iranian facilities, the presenter suggested Iran’s
attainment of a breakout capacity, its continuing rejection of International Atomic Energy Agency inspections, its unremitting and unwarranted attempts to appropriate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from the historic antagonists and champion a cause that might cast it in the role of savior, and the possible reformulation of Iran’s national interest to give effect to its implicit threat to hurl Israel into the sea.

A participant asked whether the Iranian nuclear bomb, a Shiite bomb, is likely to generate a Sunni bomb. Yes, replied the presenter who then responded to questions about the prospect of dealing with a Sunni bomb and identified the end result as the proliferation of the arms race in the region—a race that would include the quest to acquire the latest and the most effective conventional and nuclear weapons.

The presenter discussed a range of options that can be employed to deal with the current situation regarding the acquisition of nuclear materials in the Greater Middle East: (1) diplomacy; (2) deterrence; (3) an American military strike. Undoubtedly a debate will occur over which option to employ. Then the most likely scenario was described: Western diplomacy will not be successful; the United States will decide not to act; Israel will decide to act on its own. According to the presenter, U.S. deterrence does not look credible to Israel, to the Arabs, and to Iran. Moreover, the presenter asserted, Iran’s political DNA, like that of the Soviet Union, does not allow it to be led.

A presenter elaborated on the discussion of deterrence by examining the components on which its effectiveness is based: credibility, trust, and confidence. As the presenter related, the cold war gave credence to the concept of deterrence, for it was to prevent aggressive warfare by promising retaliation that NATO was instituted in the postwar period. Deterrence in the Greater Middle East can be credible, the presenter emphasized, if the European states sign a treaty to defend the region and station nuclear armed troops, as well as missile-intercepting equipment, in strategic areas of the region, as NATO troops and equipment, especially American troops and materiel, were stationed in Europe as a tripwire against a Soviet advance across the Continent during the cold war. The credibility inherent in the European armed presence, it was suggested, should be strong enough to convince the Iranians to renounce or abandon their status as the most significant prospective aggressor in the region and cooperate with their neighbors in the Greater Middle East to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

Instead of narrating “the Iranian Story,” which can begin with “Once upon
a time in Tehran,” where the United States gave nuclear materials to the shah that could be used to initiate a nuclear program for military purposes in 1956, a participant related “the European Story” that focuses on the end of the cold war. As told from the West European point of view, the Soviet Union’s engagement with its foes led to its downfall, and regime change facilitated its collapse. A participant followed the brief outline of the plot of “the European Story” by recounting “the American Story” that covers the same period. It focuses on the role played by a former American actor as president of the United States. In this rendition, President Ronald Reagan engaged with the Soviets, and the force or credibility of his personality, as well as his principles and positions and his concomitant strengthening of the U.S. military, led to the downfall of the Soviet Union and regime change.

Detente, as the process of engagement came to be known, produced a variety of results. According to one participant, it prolonged the political life of the Soviet Union by giving it credibility. The participant compared life in the Soviet Union with life in Iran and remarked that the treatment of the opposition in particular and human rights in general in both countries exemplifies repressive behavior that is worthy of condemnation.

A presenter emphasized the importance of analyzing Iranian behavior in context. Not to be forgotten, the presenter underscored, is the fact that compromise is anathema to the Iranians and that saving face is the animating force behind all of the political tactics that they employ to export their revolutionary cause. Should their reactors be hit, they will try to cover up the evidence of their vulnerability to attack. Any attack or counterattack, the presenter maintained, should be based on the understanding that the Iranian terrain promotes low-intensity warfare and proxy attacks waged by such surrogate forces as Hamas and Hezbollah. Based on the Iran-Iraq war, the extensive use of terror, propaganda, and harassment would be weapons of psychological warfare employed by the Iranians.

If Iran were attacked by the Israelis, the pivotal question to be asked would be not how much damage the Israelis inflicted, but what political impact the attack had produced. If the attack underscored the vulnerability of the Iranians and caused the Israelis, the Arabs, and the Americans to question the military power of the Iranians in the region, the Iranians might move immediately to eliminate their fledgling but not apparently ineffective nuclear weapons program and seek to reestablish their credibility in other ways. Similarly, other states might seek to withdraw from supporting one of the parties in the struggle if they perceived that the question of nuclear disarmament had become
subordinate to or intertwined with the Iranian-Israeli relationship that is not the top priority of other states in the region.

After participating in the discussion of how context can be used to assess an attack on reactor sites, a presenter proceeded to provide a tour de raison of Iran’s nuclear capabilities. The mullahs, the presenter reported, suspended the nuclear program when Khomeini assumed power and formed the Islamic Republic of Iran. Resumed during the war against Iraq, the program experienced rapid growth after Dr. Khan, the defiant Pakistani scientist, visited the country in the 1990s on his way across the region to sell stolen centrifuge designs. Progress, the presenter related, has been achieved in all four parts of the fuel cycle.

Recommending that participants read the IAEA report of February 2009, the presenter highlighted relevant statistics that not only showed the extent to which Iran was prepared to install an additional 3,000 to 6,000 centrifuges quickly but that doing so for the purpose of producing fuel for peaceful purposes made no sense at all. As many states have discovered, it is cheaper to obtain such fuel on the open market from a consortium in Europe or from Russia, the United States, or another producing country. In other words, Iran’s statement about the purpose of the fuel that was to be produced by its reactors that were close to completion defied credibility.

Moreover, Iran’s refusal to sign the additional protocol to IAEA safeguards agreements reflected its preference to keep off-limits key areas of its nuclear program, in particular centrifuge manufacturing and storage locations, and the Arak heavy water reactor that remains under construction. Under Iran’s existing safeguards agreement, only sites that contain nuclear material are safeguarded. Despite an increase in their obligations to the IAEA, which require the possessors of nuclear materials to allow the inspectors not only to inspect the materials produced at a site but also to inspect the equipment that produced the materials, 130 countries signed the protocol. Saying no to such inspections enabled the mullahs of Iran to reject the IAEA’s inspection of reactor sites and its request for an interview with an Iranian intelligence operative purported to have knowledge of work that had been performed there to produce nuclear weapons.

Despite developments that enhance proliferation in the region, the presenter expressed optimism derived from the Obama administration’s apparent commitment to Article 6 of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. That article obligates the signatory states to make progress toward disarmament by eliminating nuclear weapons. The president has announced that he is ready
to begin discussions leading to that end. Also, the presenter related, the president has stated that he will resubmit the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to the Senate for ratification. In essence, the presenter paraphrased what can be called the key elements of constructive engagement as defined by the United States and communicated to Iran as the means of forming peaceful relationships with all states, especially other states in the region: Build up your nuclear power infrastructure, and make it credible; as soon as you have the power reactors, let your operators talk to IAEA inspectors; you are adhering to the additional protocol; and you have rejoined the club of responsible, peaceful nuclear states, then you can engage in a sensible discussion about an enrichment facility in Iran because then there would be a rationale for it.

Also discussed in the context of constructive engagement was Iran’s brutal treatment of minority groups in the country, as well as the Obama administration’s apparent lack of reaction to the violations of the human rights of such groups as the Sunnis, the Baha’i, and gay people that are occurring there. Every participant agreed that the imprisonment and in some cases the disappearance of such branded individuals will continue until the Iranians are confronted with the fact that everybody knows that the people whom they have arrested are opponents of the regime or the victims of fundamentalist discrimination, not, as claimed, spies for Israel or the United States. The United States, in the judgment of some of the participants, needs to play a role in unmasking the Iranian leaders as the exponents and exporters of a messianic cause that brooks no compromise.

In discussing whether Israel would attack Iran’s suspected nuclear weapons producing site, a participant reiterated that that would be a political decision on Israel’s part based on its belief that it could succeed in carrying out its strike on the Iranian facility. What, one participant asked, would be the Arab reaction or reactions to Iran’s success in achieving the status of a nuclear power. A participant discussed two antithetical kinds of reaction—both, curiously, based on the absence or nonparticipation of the United States. The first would involve ignoring the historic differences between the Sunnis and the Shiites and the Persians and the Arabs and forming a group of subordinate Arab states led by the new hegemon in the region—Iran. The second would involve seeking the overt and tangible support of Turkey or Russia or China or all three states and counterpoising that more powerfully armed and led nuclear bloc against the Iranian led group galvanized by its success in obtaining nuclear weapons and the possibility of fulfilling its aspirations in the Greater Middle East.

During the course of summarizing the day’s proceedings, all of the participants
concluded that proliferation is not inevitable in the Greater Middle East where events seem to develop a context and a timetable of their own, making them especially difficult to anticipate. The apparent Arab interest in acquiring nuclear weapons, which would add greatly to proliferation, is based, the participants agreed, on the fear of Iran and its intentions and the tarnished credibility of the United States stemming from the erroneous impression of its relationship with Iran. Coupled with fear and suspicion is resentment over the fact that the Arabs have been denied the right to produce nuclear materials and the perception that a blanket denial of that kind reflects a kind of racism—a reaction also rampant on the Arab street.

The possibility that Iran might wage conventional warfare in the region in order to realize its ambitions in the Greater Middle East was also discussed. So was its military capability to do so. In the judgment of one participant, that prospect is unlikely. Iran’s terrain, the participant reminded the others, is conducive to low intensity warfare and proxy warfare. In the 1990s Iran embarked on a program designed to enlarge its army. Iran’s claim that it can mobilize as many as 20 million men was generally dismissed, but raising an army of from two to three million men is a realistic prospect, a participant maintained. The question of determining how effective Iran’s army might be is especially important when the capability of its air force is considered. Its fleet, which consists of a variety of planes purchased from Russia, China, India, and Brazil, is ineffective, a participant said.

Size alone, the participant asserted, does not determine effectiveness. Leadership plays a key role in assessing the effectiveness of an army, and the performance of the Revolutionary Guard, which controls the military in Iran as part of its overall function of defending the Islamic Republic, was not effective during the war against Iraq. Nor has it been effective in controlling the rebels, the bandits, and the drug groups that operate in the wild east of Iran.

Another test of leadership, a participant declared, is the forthcoming election of June 12. The participant predicted fraud and the behind-the-scenes orchestration of the “reelection” of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president despite intelligence that shows diminished support for his oppressive rule and severe criticism of his grave mishandling of the economy.

What would be effective in fulfilling Iran’s apparent goal of destroying Israel, the participant stated, would be Iranian missiles fired at the Jewish state, which amounts to only 1 percent of Iran’s territory. If there were no credible deterrent to prevent the implementation of the enemy’s plan, an unimpeded barrage of nuclear armed missiles would do the deadly deed that they were
constructed to accomplish. Consequently, much work involving the building of credibility, deterrence, and leadership needs to be done to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Greater Middle East. In conclusion, the participants agreed, the issue of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East should command the undivided attention of the leaders of the United States and Europe as long as Iran practices deceit and builds or threatens to build nuclear bombs.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

I mpose harsh sanctions immediately if Iran remains recalcitrant. Delaying the process will only convince Iran that more and more time will be given with the hope that the Islamic Republic will eventually change its mind and accept inspections mandated by the IAEA. If Iran repeats its past behavior, however, it will be using that time to equip its hidden reactors to produce fuel for a nuclear bomb or two.

Meet with the IAEA inspection team and determine what additional provisions they need to be incorporated into the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty that would improve their prospects for finding and inspecting sites designed to produce nuclear materials for military purposes. Work with the treaty’s signatories to insert that language into the treaty.

Negotiate only at the negotiating table. Concessions granted without a quid pro quo in the full glare of international publicity may be taken by the adversary as a sign of weakness that will be exploited when actual negotiations take place.

Expand the agenda of the talks to include a discussion of Iran’s goals in the region. In return, every participant should be encouraged to talk about its objectives in the Greater Middle East. The Palestinian-Israeli issue should not be inscribed on the agenda.

Emphasize that the United States will take part in all discussions concerning Iran’s relationships with the Greater Middle East.

Support Europe’s plan to act as the first line of defense in countering any design that any other power, including Iran, has developed to wage a nuclear or a conventional war against Israel or any other power in the Greater Middle East. By standing beside its European allies in defending the Greater Middle East, the United States will increase its credibility and ensure the security and stability of the region.

Continue to monitor Iran’s nuclear weapons sites, more than one of which may or may not be hidden on the grounds of the headquarters of the Revolutionary Guards along the coast of Iran. Similarly, continue intelligence gathering based on the premise that the truthfulness of Iran has proved to be questionable in the past.
NATIONAL COMMITTEE
ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

ROUND TABLE ON
“The Greater Middle East: Is Nuclear Proliferation Inevitable?”

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Since the NCAFP’s roundtable on nuclear proliferation in the Middle East was held in the spring, a number of developments have occurred that raise the risks of an atomic arms race in the region. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s confirmation last June as president of the Islamic Republic for a second four-year term must be seen as a signal that the Iranian leadership elite is determined to press on with its controversial nuclear project. In fact, the Islamic Republic’s nuclear project is emerging as the key plank of the second Ahmadinejad administration as it faces continued opposition fomented by claims of mass electoral fraud last June.

In the past few months there have been indications that the Obama administration may have decided that it cannot stop the Iranian program and that the only option now is to build up the defensive capacities of U.S. allies in the region. In visits to the region, both Vice President Joseph Biden Jr. and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have publicly evoked the theme of containment rather than rollback in dealing with Iran’s nuclear ambitions. At the same time, the Obama administration has tried to maintain a level of harmony within the so-called 5+1 group of nations negotiating with Iran on behalf of the United Nations Security Council. To that end, President Obama decided to scrap his predecessor’s plans for building an antimissile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, plans that provoked the anger of the Kremlin. Russia rewarded the American move by reviving a plan aimed at slowing down the Iranian nuclear program. At the same time Russian President Dmitri Medvedev went on record in endorsing the possibility of further sanctions against the Islamic Republic when and if such a move became necessary. When talks between Iran and the 5+1 group, including the United States, started in Geneva in October, the stated objective was to persuade the Islamic Republic to comply with three unanimously approved resolutions of the United Nations Security Council. Those resolutions demand that Iran stop uranium enrichment or face further sanctions.

At the end of the Geneva session, however, it became clear that the talks had been put on a different trajectory. The 5+1 group appeared to have agreed to limit the talks to satisfying Iran’s need for uranium fuel for its only atomic reactor. The talks, followed by “technical negotiations” in Vienna, ended with agreement on an idea first proposed by Russia in 2004. That would allow Iran to continue enriching uranium and then ship 75 percent of it to Russia for further enrichment. Russia would then send the higher grade uranium to France for conversion to “fuel rods” for Iran’s reactor.

In another gesture of goodwill, Iran allowed inspectors from the
International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to visit a new uranium enrichment facility that Iran is building near the “holy” city of Qom southwest of Tehran. It has been under construction since 2006, but Iran informed the IAEA of its existence only in October.

The Geneva and Vienna agreements satisfy Iran’s principal demand, that is, international acceptance of its enrichment program. In exchange, the 5+1 group would get control of 75 percent of the uranium that Iran has enriched in one year. That means that Iran’s plan to build a bomb could be slowed down by several months. In November, however, Iran offered a “modified version” of the accord under which it would exchange small quantities of its enriched uranium against equivalent quantities of fuel rods from Russia and France. In other words, Iran is trying to hang onto the 1.5 tons of uranium that it has already enriched up to 4 percent. If enriched further, that stock could yield the 25 kilos of higher grade uranium needed for making one Hiroshima-size bomb.

Having initially accepted the deal, Iran quickly moved to empty it of its substance and suggested further talks in accordance with a well-known dilatory strategy. However, even if the deal were accepted by Iran, something that appears unlikely at the time of writing, it would not address the central objective, that is, to prevent Iran from building a capacity for producing an arsenal of nuclear weapons.

To start with, the facility for which Iran is supposedly trying to find fuel is scheduled for decommissioning in 2010. Located in Amirabad, now a densely populated neighborhood of Tehran, the 5-megawatt research reactor was built by the United States in the 1950s in what was then a village miles from the city center. Like that of most other nuclear reactors, the lifespan of the facility was estimated at 38 years. Since the reactor started full operation in 1967, it has outlived its lifespan. Gholam-Reza Aghazadeh, the former head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency, announced Amirabad’s closure in 2002 but agreed to keep it going until its replacement, a 40-megawatt reactor in Arak, west of Tehran, is completed. Between 1967 and 1980, the United States supplied enriched uranium for Amirabad. After 1980 Iran tried to secure enriched uranium from France where the shah had invested a billion dollars in building the largest enrichment plant in Europe. The French, however, refused to give the new Iranian regime anything. Instead, it offered to buy Iran’s share. Iran then did a deal with Argentina that provided the uranium needed until 1993 when a terror attack in Buenos Aires, allegedly carried out by Hezbollah, wrecked the relationship.

Since then Iran has been buying enriched uranium partly from South Africa and partly on the black market without the International Atomic Energy
Agency knowing what was going on.

According to the Iranian Atomic Energy Commission, Iran has enough fuel for Amirabad until 2010, when the reactor is to be decommissioned. The question is: Why buy uranium for a reactor that is going to be mothballed in a few months? Does Iran need the enriched uranium for its reactor at Arak? Again, the answer is no. Arak is a plutonium plant and does not need enriched uranium.

At the start of this year, Iran had 800 centrifuges that enrich uranium. It now has 8,000 of which half are in operation. Thus Iran already has the capacity to enrich enough uranium for making one Hiroshima size bomb every year. The process could be speeded up by operating the “new advanced” centrifuges that Iran says it already has. With 30,000 to 40,000 centrifuges, Iran could produce enough material for one bomb within weeks.

In a commentary published on October 23, the official news agency IRNA boasted: “If Iran wants to build nuclear weapons, it has no problem with fissile material.” To emphasize the point, IRNA declared that Iran had reached “the threshold or breakout” stage, which means that it has the wherewithal to become a nuclear power.

In a speech on October 22, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad described the latest negotiations as “a diplomatic victory” for his administration. He said he welcomed “nuclear cooperation” with the 5+1 group but would not accept a deal in “the form presented to us.”

Even if Iran had accepted the original deal, the real question would have remained: Should Iran comply with Security Council resolutions or not? The dispute is over forcing Iran to shut down its uranium enrichment program all together, not about helping Iran with a higher grade of uranium.

By ignoring the UN resolutions, the 5+1 may be giving Iran a license to build the bomb. That, of course, has not escaped the attention of other nations in the Middle East. Judging by public statements, confirmed by informed sources in private, several nations, notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, have decided to speed up their own nuclear projects, always under the cover of “developing new sources of energy.”

Today the issue is still one of preventing nuclear proliferation. Very soon, however, and unless the Iranian program is stopped, the issue facing the 5+1 will be one of managing proliferation and its unpredictable consequences.
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