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Plan B for Persia Precarious But Necessary if Diplomacy Fails

August 2007
by Sean Hazlett

Sean Hazlett is a former Army officer and recent graduate of the Harvard Business School and the Harvard John F. Kennedy School of Government where he won a Prize for Outstanding Policy Analysis Exercise for his work “Plan B for Persia: Responding to Iran’s Nuclear Weapons Program Absent Diplomatic Agreement” and worked as a research assistant for Dr. Ashton Carter at the Stanford-Harvard Preventive Defense Project. He is an Investment Banking Associate at Morgan Stanley in San Francisco.

Iran’s consistent refusal to abide by the multiple UN Security Council deadlines to halt uranium enrichment and its recent announcement to expand this enrichment to an industrial scale highlight the limits of current diplomacy. The US and its allies must prepare the political, economic, and military landscape should diplomacy fail. It is in Iran’s interest to prolong negotiations while its scientists move inexorably toward development of a nuclear device. At some point, the US must draw a red line after which it focuses less on current diplomacy – Plan A – and more on Plan B – an alternative path to a successful diplomatic outcome that either rolls back Iran’s nuclear ambitions or adjusts US policy to contain Iranian regional aggression emboldened by nuclear weapons. Either alternative is precarious, but one of them will become a reality absent a diplomatic agreement.

A coercive US policy to roll back Iran’s nuclear program must proceed in parallel with current diplomacy, focus exclusively on Iran’s nuclear intransigence, and mutually reinforce Plan A. This policy would begin with political sanctions including travel bans and asset freezes against current members of the Iranian regime, escalate to economic sanctions, and ultimately end with some form of military action.

Because of the world’s critical reliance on oil and Iran’s dependency on oil revenues that finance between 80-90% of its total export earnings and 40-50% of its government budget to shore up its regime, it is unlikely that either side would risk provoking the other in an oil embargo. While Iran’s narrow, shallow ports and highly vulnerable oil terminals in the Persian Gulf present attractive targets for military planners that would enable the US to virtually shut down Iranian oil exports,

the US is unlikely to pursue this path. Iran's response to such an action would likely involve an effort to mine, sink oil tankers or launch weapons of mass destruction in, at, or near the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which 40% of internationally traded oil flows. Instead, the US and its allies would most likely target Iran's imports of high technology and machinery which derive mainly from countries in the European Union.

Should the Iranians continue to enrich uranium after the US and its allies apply political and economic sanctions, the US must contemplate the unthinkable: a military strike on Iran's nuclear complex to roll back its nuclear program a number of years. The US could accomplish this objective in a variety of ways ranging from a full-scale military invasion to covert action. The most likely outcome would be a precision strike that is limited to critical nodes in the Iranian nuclear program without which the Iranians could not enrich uranium.

The consequences of coercion guarantee an Iranian response. Politically, the Iranians are almost certain to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty ending the United Nations' ability to monitor Iran's nuclear program. The Iranians might also convince the Shia-dominated Iraqi government to demand the withdrawal of US troops in Iraq using their informal associations with powerful Shiite militias to generate internal political pressure.

Economically, in addition to disrupting Gulf shipping lanes by mining, sinking tankers, or using WMD in the Strait of Hormuz, Iran might attack Saudi oil fields to disrupt the global supply of oil using ballistic missiles or sabotage by terrorists.

Militarily, the Iranians might retaliate against the US, its allies, and US interests through increased international terrorism, support of Shia insurgencies throughout the Gulf, and WMD use against US military bases and US regional allies.

If the consequences of coercion seem grim, US strategic adjustment to a nuclear-armed Iran is even bleaker. Nuclear war in the region will be increasingly likely. While the Iranian regime is unlikely to use nuclear weapons without provocation, mutual misperceptions between Iran and Israel as each nation remains on a hair trigger will dramatically increase the likelihood of a nuclear exchange.

Some nations would also perceive Iran's successful development of nuclear weapons as a US strategic failure, which might result in the death knell of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in the region and stimulate a proliferation spiral among Iran's rivals to include Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. To halt this spiral, the US would have to extend its nuclear umbrella over its regional allies to reassure them against Iranian use of nuclear weapons. This nuclear umbrella would probably deter the Iranians until they developed ballistic missiles capable of reaching American cities. At that point, it would be difficult to imagine an American president willingly trading New York for Riyadh.

Emboldened by its nuclear deterrent, Iran is also likely to engage in increased regional adventurism to achieve its national interests by toppling US-friendly regimes, engaging in increased regional and international terrorism, and bullying Arab states. Iraq might become a

neo-Germany in a neo-Cold War between Iran and the United States as both sides vie for the support of different factions in a fragmented Iraqi state. To contain Iran, the US would be required to increase the forward presence of US troops that might last decades and result in the loss of far more blood and treasure than the current insurgency consumes in Iraq.

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