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Europe's success in Iran has a hollow ring

by Benjamin Schreer and Asle Toje
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Non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is a crucial part of the draft European Union security strategy unveiled in June by Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief. So Tuesday's announcement by Iran - made after talks with British, German and French foreign ministers - that it would suspend its uranium enrichment programme and allow unrestricted inspection of nuclear facilities looks, on the face of it, like

a powerful vindication of that strategy. Such an upbeat assessment, however, would be premature. Iran's nuclear ambitions could yet be the rock on which it founders.

Much is at stake. There are growing concerns in the US and Europe that Iran is pursuing a clandestine nuclear weapons programme, in breach of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), which the

MAIN POINTS

Whether the EU succeeds in preventing Iran from going nuclear is a test case for its new security strategy. Despite promising recent developments, however, the prospects are bleak. A unified European approach will depend on the EU's ability to turn Solana's call for a strategic culture into reality.

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country has signed. Iran has denied the allegations but has failed to convince inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The IAEA has set a deadline of October 31 for Tehran to answer all questions concerning its suspected nuclear weapons programme. Otherwise, the US will press for the issue to come before the UN Security Council.

The Iran question has all the makings of an international crisis. Iran going nuclear would probably sound the death knell of the NPT, which has already been weakened by the Pakistani and North Korean nuclear programmes. It could prompt Saudi Arabia and Egypt to consider similar steps, leading to a nuclear arms race in the region. It would also raise questions - certainly in Tel Aviv, probably in Washington - about pre-emptive military strikes.

But what about Brussels? The Solana paper calls for a more active EU role in global security to meet its obligation as a global power. Mirroring its US counterpart, the 2002 National Security Strategy, identifies three main threats: terrorism, WMD and failed states. The draft strategy also commits the EU to dealing with these threats and acting before a crisis

occurs; it even allows for "pre-emptive engagement". But to what extent will the Solana paper translate into policy?

It depends. There are few reasons to be too optimistic, despite the recent signs of a new assertiveness in the EU's policy towards Iran. Brussels has reconsidered its policy of "constructively engaging" the Iranians, threatening to terminate its trade negotiations with Iran if the country does not sign and implement the IAEA's additional protocol. This would open the way for more thorough inspections of Iran's suspected nuclear facilities. And the latest visit by EU heavyweights - after which Iran said it would implement the protocol - certainly seemed in line with the policy of multilateral engagement set out in the draft strategy.

Unfortunately, few security commentators believe that Tehran will live up to its commitments and relinquish a long-sought strategic option that is closely connected with its regional security concerns. Iran's latest move, an IAEA official has told us, may well be an attempt at buying time and putting a wedge between the EU, the IAEA and the US. If the EU foreign ministers do secure a deal between Iran and the IAEA, that would be a success for the EU's constructive engagement approach. But if Iran fails to comply, the EU can-

not be expected to take decisive action, because of the deficiencies in its security and defence policy.

While the Solana paper correctly points to the need to develop a European strategic culture for “early, rapid and, when necessary, robust intervention”, it fails to explain how and when such intervention should take place. The principles guiding a military response by the EU are as yet undefined, except for talk of a “common assessment” of threats by member states. This is what the Americans contemptuously refer to as “war by committee”. The problem with this approach is that in times of crisis - such as the run-up to war with Iraq - European unity tends to crumble under the pressure of member states’ conflicting short-term interests.

The more weapons technologies proliferate, the easier it becomes for weapons of mass destruction to proliferate further. In such a situation, prudent, well thought-out and rigorously adopted standards are indispensable. If the EU ends up deadlocked over Iran and its nuclear programme - an issue at the heart of the Union’s security strategy - its credibility as a global security force will have been seriously weakened.

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