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Getting between Iran and the bomb

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Both US and EU security strategies see terrorism, failed states, and proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) as primary threats. So why then, are relations Euro-American so strained? Much of the answer lies in a deep disagreement on how to deal with threats. Iran is rapidly becoming an important test case on whether dialogue or military force the best way to make dictatorships live up to their international obligations.

Why Iran? Iran has over the past decade spent much money on a nuclear programme that it clearly not needs for civilian purposes. I see a number of reasons why Iran would want nuclear weapons. The recent history of invasions and unwanted foreign influence plays a role here. Iran was neutral during the WW I & II but Britain and Russia established spheres of influence there to shut out Germany. After the war, the US

MAIN POINTS

Iran and WMD is a test case for the different US and EU strategies for dealing with threats. Although there are good reasons why Iran wants to go nuclear, the West cannot allow this to happen. EU dialogue is preferable to US military strikes, but only if it succeeds in dissuading Iran from getting the bomb.

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helped persuade the Russians to leave, and the Shah regained absolute power. The next 30 years can be summarised under the heading 'repression and modernisation'. The US propped up the unpopular regime of the Shah – and has as a result had especially bad relations with Tehran since 1979. That year nationalist and Islamic fundamentalist forces overthrew the Shah and the current theocratic republic was established. The Iranian feeling of living in a dangerous neighbourhood is not calmed by neighbouring Pakistan being a nuclear state - and so is the arch enemy Israel. Also: the lessons from Iraq and North Korea spells out a clear message to the third country on the US axis of evil: nuclear weapons make the US think twice.

In order to understand this logic let us look at Iran's security options: Firstly, it could do nothing. I think this is unlikely. The Iranian security dilemma is real and acute. A change of regime in Teheran is unlikely to change this. Leaders, regardless of ideological leanings, are unlikely to end the WMD programme. Secondly, Iran could ask for security guarantees. For example a deal where the US and EU states offer guarantees for the country's security. I think this is unlikely. Iran is on the US 'axis of evil' for a reason. For this to become an option Iran would need to

shift towards a more liberal, more democratic administration. The third and final option is that Iran becomes a nuclear state. There are many signs that this has been the policy chosen.

So Iran is going nuclear – so what? For Iran to become a military nuclear state is a violation of its obligations to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which it signed in 1970. This may well mean the end for the treaty and could open the flood gates, introducing nuclear weapons to all corners of the world. Another point is question whether a government which provides ideological, political, financial, and logistical support to international terrorist organisations should be allowed to have nuclear weapons.

So who should act? With the US busy elsewhere EU leaders have tried to make Iran give up its illegal nuclear activities through dialogue. So the announcement by Iran in October 2003 - made after talks with the British, German, and French foreign ministers - that it would suspend its uranium enrichment programme and allow unrestricted inspection of nuclear facilities looked, on the face of it, like a powerful vindication of the EU strategy of 'constructive engagement'. Iran was offered a way back into international society and trade if it promised to halt its nuclear

programme. Unfortunately, in international affairs, things that look too good to be true are usually not true. Iran has not promised to give up the programme, just to pause it. The country has a strong motivation to build the bomb. It has the money and the knowhow and the technology. Iran's diplomatic manoeuvres may well be attempts at buying time and playing the EU and the US up against each other.

And what should the West do? Military strikes are a real option for the US. There is a profound irony in that an American administration that has done so much to undermine international rules and cooperation is so eager to punish other wrong-doers. I think there is plenty of reason to handle Iran with care. Many will remember the revolution, the hostages in the US embassy and the failed attempt at rescuing them. This can serve as an illustration of what can go wrong if attempts are made to strike militarily at the Iranian nuclear programme. In the final instance military strikes against Iran could stop the country's slide towards a more liberal and democratic future.

So the EU approach is clearly better. But only if it makes Iran give up its nuclear ambitions. Too often EU foreign policy takes place in a world where lofty speeches and 'monitoring the situation'

solves the problem and any evidence to the contrary is simply ignored. The EU therefore must spell out what will happen if Iran cheats. If Iran lives up to its promises this would strengthen the EU as a leading force for multilateralism, good governance, and collective security. If not, it could prove a major blow to multilateral arms control – and to the EU security policy.

What is the role of the OCGG in all this? Raising awareness is an important job. The aim of the OCGG when it comes to security issues is to avoid violent conflict by raising awareness about potential crisis and how targeted action can be taken to avoid it reaching a boiling point. This also means providing analysis about ineffective policies.

Unfortunately many questions are so difficult to solve that it is tempting for the politicians to do like in the final scene of the Bosnian movie 'No Man's Land': make sure the cameras go away and then leave the victim lying on a land mine. We hope to contribute to stop that from happening by drawing attention to the crisis of the day after tomorrow. Right now we are preparing a publication where amongst other Chris Patten and Javier Solana are explaining the new EU security policy.

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