Looking Beyond the Bomb: the Non-Military Drivers of Iran's Nuclear Ambitions

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Abstract

This article analyses the dilemma of mistrust in the conflict over Iran's nuclear program. The related tendency to view the other side's intentions in the worst possible light has contributed to the Western fixation with the Iranian bomb, leaving little room for alternative explanations. Here it is argued that the lack of serious attention to the non-military drivers of Iran's nuclear ambitions has inhibited understanding of the country's respective lack of trust in US intentions, thus making it harder to address Iranian concerns. Cynical assessments of Iran's intentions have also contributed to the danger of self-fulfilling prophesy by increasing the likelihood of military action and thus highlighting Iran's need to keep open the option of developing a nuclear deterrent. In addition to shedding light on the Iranian perspective, the article reflects on the dilemma of trust from the Western perspective, applying insights from political psychology. It also looks at how the seemingly inescapable downward spiral of mutual mistrust began to be reversed in 2013, and considers the prospects for a comprehensive deal.

Resumo

Para Além da Bomba: Indutores Não-Militares das Ambições Nucleares Iranianas

Este artigo analisa o dilema da desconfiança presente no conflito que incide sobre o programa nuclear do Irão. A tendência para ver as intenções do outro lado à luz do pior cenário possível contribuiu para a fixação Ocidental face a uma bomba nuclear iraniana, deixando pouco espaço para explicações alternativas. Este artigo argumenta que a ausência de uma consideração séria pelas motivações não-militares por detrás das ambições nucleares do Irão tem inibido a compreensão sobre a desconfiança que existe neste país face às intenções dos Estados Unidos da América, tornando mais difícil de abordar as preocupações iranianas. Avaliações céticas sobre as intenções do Irão também contribuíram para o perigo de profecias negativas, dado que aumentam a probabilidade de ação militar e reforçam a necessidade do Irão em manter em aberto a opção de desenvolver uma dissuasão nuclear. Para além de tentar demonstrar a perspetiva iraniana, o artigo reflete também sobre o dilema de confiança oriundo da perspetiva Ocidental, aplicando perceções de psicologia politica. Por fim, analisa como a alegada inevitável espiral de desconfiança mútua começou a ser revertida em 2013, e considera as perspetivas para um acordo abrangente.

Introduction

The dispute over Iran's nuclear program has for the most part seemed to defy all attempts at diplomatic solution. The crisis began to unfold in 2002 and it escalated particularly since 2006, with Iran stepping up its controversial uranium enrichment program and the other side imposing sanctions and issuing military threats. Reflecting a persistent Western tendency to take Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions for granted, many at the time saw sanctions as the only alternative to 'an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran' (Sarkozy, 2007).

However, the more recent diplomatic progress in the nuclear talks between Iran and the five permanent Security Council members and Germany (the so-called P5+1) suggests that that the previous interpretation of the situation was based on overly cynical assumptions. In this article it is argued that such assumptions, as well as the related tendency to ignore the non-military motivations behind Iran's nuclear program, have inhibited understanding of Iran's respective lack of trust in Western intentions. It thus starts from the assumption that the problem of mistrust in the dispute over Iran's nuclear program is mutual, and that tackling of this problem has only become possible when each side are serious about acknowledging and addressing the other's key concerns. Insights from political psychology are applied to understand the related diplomatic challenges. The article also looks at how the dynamics of mistrust began to be reversed in 2013, explaining the positive change largely in terms of increasing Western sensitivity to Iranian concerns.

While also engaging with the Western suspicions about Iranian intentions, the article mainly seeks to shed light on the less-known Iranian concerns and on how they explain the country's insistence in maintaining its uranium enrichment program. The starting point here is that any speculation about Iranian intentions is prone to misperception without a genuine attempt to understand the country's nuclear policy on its own terms. In addition to the dynamics of mistrust, prestige and military considerations are also seen to explain Iranian nuclear policy. While this article therefore does not deny that there is a military rationale behind Iran's nuclear program, this is not regarded as the predominant driver of that program. Furthermore, when highlighting the role of prestige in connection with the nuclear dispute, this is linked with Iran's quest for nuclear self-sufficiency and the need to save face in the nuclear confrontation, rather than the standard association between prestige and nuclear weapons.

The paper begins with a background discussion, recalling key events in the dispute over Iran's nuclear program. It then discusses the non-military rationales behind the country's nuclear ambitions, highlighting mistrust and prestige considerations. This is followed by an explanation for the Western suspicions and the related lack of attention to Iranian concerns. The next part, in turn, explains the recent diplomatic success in terms of an increasing hopes regarding the possibility of a mutually

acceptable end goal. The paper ends with an identification of obstacles that continue to cast a shadow on the prospects of a comprehensive solution.

Background

Although the US and Israel had suspected Iran of having had a secret nuclear weapons program since early 1990s (Peterson, 2011), the current international dispute started only in 2002, with revelations about undeclared nuclear activities in the country. In 2003 Iran admitted that it had an undeclared uranium-enrichment facility and a heavy-water reactor. Although the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) does not prohibit its members from having such facilities, the fact that Iran had not reported them, as well as experiments on enrichment, was seen to go against the country's obligations. While the US argued that this constituted noncompliance with the NPT and called for an immediate referral to the UN Security Council, the Europeans preferred the route of negotiation.

In May 2003, Iran made the US a secret offer for comprehensive bilateral negotiations—proposing to address not only the nuclear but also other major issues of concern between the two countries that had been at odds since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, the offer was turned down by the Bush administration, which had recently placed Iran on its 'axis of evil' (Parsi, 2007: 248). In effect, the UK, France, and Germany (the so-called EU3) began to pursue the negotiations with Iran. They reached a deal whereby Iran agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment activities for the duration of the negotiations, to allow extensive inspections, and to resolve outstanding issues related to with past undeclared activities with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The EU3 for their part, in a Communication on November 26, 2004, committed themselves to providing Iran with "guarantees on nuclear, technological and economic cooperation and firm commitments on security issues". Absent US involvement, however, the EU was hardly in a position to deliver the proposed incentives. At the same time, the 2005 presidential elections in Iran created pressure to show that the enrichment program had not been completely halted. In March Iran came up with a proposal whereby it would freeze industrial-scale enrichment while beginning "enrichment with five hundred centrifuges at its pilot plant", under close monitoring by the IAEA (ElBaradei, 2011: 144). By this time, however, the EU3 had moved closer to the US position that there should be "not one centrifuge running in Iran" (ElBaradei; 2011: 192-195), leaving little common ground to continue negotiations.

In effect, Iran resumed the suspended activities, and the Europeans finally gave their support to the finding of non-compliance and referral to the UN Security Council involvement (Sauer 2007). The Security Council issued a Presidential Statement on March 29, 2006, calling for Iran to "take the steps […] which are essential to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful purpose of its nuclear program".

While Russia and the IAEA chief still proposed that Iran be allowed to run limited enrichment operations, President Bush argued that Iran "can't be trusted with enrichment" because "enriching uranium is a step toward having a nuclear weapon" (Bush, 2008). Combined with Iran's insistence on its right to enrichment, this position effectively ruled out any further negotiations.

In 2006 the P5+1 took over the nuclear diplomacy with Iran, although in practice there were no talks until mid-2008 due to the US precondition that Iran first suspend its nuclear activities. Diplomacy thus meant pressuring Iran to accept the June 2006 package of proposals, which promised negotiations on various incentives if Iran would agree to suspension, address outstanding issues, and accept more intrusive inspections. Given Iran's refusal to comply, the Security Council issued its first resolution on the country in July 2006, followed by several rounds of sanctions starting in December 2006.

The inauguration of President Obama lead to first serious talks in October 2009. Rather than the demand for suspension, the talks focused on a confidence-building deal whereby Iran would send most of its low-enriched uranium (LEU) abroad for reprocessing, and receive highly enriched uranium in return. The failure of this first confidence-building attempt - together with Iran's subsequent announcement that it had started enriching up to 20 per cent - led to the fourth UN sanctions resolution. This was followed by unprecedentedly harsh US and EU sanctions on Iran's Central Bank and oil industry in 2011-2012. The fruitless negotiations in 2012 and spring 2013 focused mainly on Iran's enrichment up to 20 percent and at Fordo.

The election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's new President in summer 2013 brought about an unprecedented exchange of reconciliatory gestures between Tehran and Washington. The subsequent talks that began in October led to an unprecedented breakthrough on 24 November 2013, as the parties agreed on interim deal known as the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA). The deal, which is to be followed by a comprehensive agreement, involves restriction and enhanced monitoring of Iran's nuclear activities and limited sanctions relief by the P5+1. More specifically, under the agreement Iran has committed itself to freezing uranium enrichment and neutralizing the stockpile of uranium enriched up to 20 percent Tehran also promised to refrain from installing and using additional centrifuges and to open up its nuclear facilities to daily inspections. In addition to the previous offer of sanctions relief on gold, metals and petrochemicals as well as spare parts and repairs for Iran's civilian aircraft, the P5+1 concessions also included the US suspension of sanctions on Iran's auto industry and partial unfreezing of Iranian assets abroad (Joint Plan of Action, 2013)

Initially a six-month confidence-building process, the JPOA has been extended twice in July and November 2014. The current deadline for a comprehensive agreement is in June 2015. In parallel with the search for a political agreement, Iran and

the IAEA are working to resolve outstanding issues concerning the potential military dimensions (PMD) of activities that took place prior to 2003. The IAEA's ability to reach a 'broad conclusion' on this issue is undermined by its lack of expertise in weaponization (Rauf and Kelley, 2014) and Iran's reluctance to give out sensitive information (Dahl, 2014).

The Non-Military Rationales behind Iran's Nuclear Policy: Mistrust and Prestige

Like many other countries, Iran relies on nuclear energy to meet growing energy needs and to release more oil for exports. It also uses the technology for medical, agricultural and other industrial purposes. Unlike most others, however, Iran has also decided to enrich uranium, thus seeking to produce its own nuclear fuel. This choice lies at the core of the nuclear dispute, as enriched uranium could also be diverted to military use. Proliferation concerns about this duel use technology have been enforced by the country's previous lack of transparency and claims about PMD. While the IAEA is still struggling to verify the accuracy of related evidence, US intelligence agencies have concluded that Iran had a nuclear weapons program until 2003. That they also concluded that halted that program and "is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging" (National Intelligence Estimate, 2007) further highlights the need to understand which rationales, apart from the military ones, explain Iranian nuclear policy.

The Need for Civilian Nuclear Energy

When Iran's nuclear program started in the 1970s, it received broad Western support. At the time, key US administration officials not only "endorsed Iranian plans to build a massive nuclear energy industry, but also worked hard to complete a […] deal that would have given Tehran control of large quantities of plutonium and enriched uranium". In 1976, the US President also signed a directive that allowed Iran to have a complete nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment. The rationale was to help Iran "prepare against the time […] when Iranian oil production is expected to decline sharply" (Linzer, 2005).

The civilian logic behind Iran's nuclear program have remained unchanged until this day, with the distinction that energy needs have grown. Since the 1970s, Iran's population has doubled, leading to increased consumption and what a 2009 IAEA report calls "an incremental trend of energy intensity". The same report states that, due to "the limitation of the existing technologies […], it is not expected that renewable[s] play a major role in Iran's electricity system in near future", making the nuclear option as "the most competitive to fossil alternatives" (IAEA Country Nuclear Power Profiles/Iran, 2009)

In line with these assessments, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on 4 November 2005, has argued that "[w]e want some of our unrenewable resources to remain for

the coming generations" and "[w]e do not want our country to run out of oil over the next 20 or 25 years". Khamenei, on 9 March 2006, also said that, "in today's world, scientific strength is key to economic and political strength", and if Iran "fails to possess a nuclear energy-generated power system, it will face with many problems".

The Quest for Nuclear Self-Sufficiency

Although Iran's civilian nuclear energy needs are rarely disputed today, this was not always the case. After the 1979 revolution, the US reversed from its previous policy of supporting Iran's nuclear program to undermining attempts to develop it further. As a result, Iran's requests for cooperation with previous Western partners were refused, or cooperation soon ended. For example, a Spanish company with whom Iran signed a deal to complete the construction of the Bushehr power plant cancelled the plans, referring to US pressure and proliferation concerns. Ultimately, Russia was left as Iran's lone nuclear partner in finishing the construction the country's first power reactor, based on a deal made in 1995 (Koch and Wolf, 1998) As for the clandestine development of uranium enrichment technology, in this effort Iran received crucial assistance from A. Q. Khan's network (IAEA, 2004).

Iranian officials have argued that the development of nuclear fuel production capacity, as well as the need to do this in secret, had to do with the difficulties in accessing the international nuclear market (Zarif 2007: 81-82). Adding to this experience were the delays in the reactor construction and subsequent fuel shipments from Russia in the 2000s. Although Russia explained the delays in terms technical difficulties, they seem to have been part of a collusion whereby Russia, in Garth Porter's words, agreed "to squeeze Iran on its nuclear policy" in exchange for "political-military concessions from the United States". He further argues that "[t]he experience with Russia… hardened Iran's determination to be self-reliant in nuclear fuel fabrication" (Porter, 2014a)

Paradoxically, the US relaxed its previous position at the start of the current crisis in early 2000s: instead of opposing any kind of a nuclear program, it began to argue that Iran should not enrich uranium. As President Bush said, on June 19, 2006, the desire of Iranian people "to make... greater progress, including the development of civilian nuclear energy... is a legitimate desire" but adding up in July 4, 2008, they "can't be trusted with enrichment". For Iran, however, giving up enrichment-related activities would have meant perpetuating the country's dependence on unreliable foreign partners and thus risking the entire program. As written in Iran's response to the P5+1 package of proposals in June 6, 2006, "[r]epeated breaches and noncompliance by European countries and the United States of their undertakings under the NPT as well as their contractual obligations in cooperation and transfer of technology […] and lack of international

guarantees in non-interrupted provision of fuel has left no option except to move to produce part of the required fuel domestically.

Although Iran has overcome a major technological hurdle by succeeding in uranium enrichment, it should be noted that this has not yet made the country self-reliant in fuel production. The process includes the likewise complicated task of turning LEU into fuel assemblies which Iran has yet to master. The only functioning power reactor in Bushehr, as well as the additional ones that Russia agreed to build in November 2014, thus rely on Russian fuel. Iran nevertheless hopes to be able to master the manufacturing of fuel assemblies in the near future (Porter, 2014b).

Iranian View of Suspension as the Goal, Rather than Means to Negotiation

While Iran has made clear that it will not give up enrichment, the country's position regarding the suspension of related activities has varied depending on political circumstances. As noted above, Iran was more forthcoming during the talks with the EU3 (and in the context of the current talks under the JPOA). In retrospect, however, Iranian officials referred to their experience with the EU3 as yet another factor enforcing their suspicions about the other side's intentions. In December 23, 2006 and according to the current Iranian foreign minister and nuclear negotiator Javad Zarif, the reason why the talks with the EU3 went nowhere was that "the United States, and apparently the EU3 - in spite of what they told us" wanted "a binding commitment [for Iran] not to pursue fuel cycle activities". Khamenei, in turn, explained that he had to personally put on end to the [Iran-EU3] process because, if Iran's "retreats had continued… today there would be no nuclear advances and no scientific dynamism and innovation in the country" (Khamenei, 24 July, 2012).

The suspension of enrichment became a red line particularly after it was made legally binding through the first UN Security Council resolution. Iran rejected the Council's demands as both politically motivated and illegal, pointing out that neither uranium enrichment nor reprocessing are restricted by the NPT. From the Iranian perspective, it seemed that the other side was more interested in isolating and undermining the Iranian regime than solving the nuclear problem. (Khazaee, 3 March, 2008). Instead of proliferation concerns, the key problem, from the perspective of Khamenei, is the US opposition "to the identity […] influence and power of the Islamic Republic", and by its desire to turn Iran into "a weak, abandoned, isolated, […] and humiliated nation" (Khamenei, 3 November, 2013). Reflective of the persistence of this suspicion in the context of the present diplomatic progress, Khamenei on February 8, 2014) also recently said that "American politicians […] would not hesitate even for a moment to destroy the foundation of the Islamic Republic" if they could. Such remarks highlight that the core problem in the nuclear confrontation is the conflict between the US and Iran. Although an

in-depth discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, the related dynamics of mistrust are discussed further ahead.

Prestige: Glorification of Resistance and Nuclear Self-Reliance

In the course of the nuclear confrontation with the West, Iran's nuclear policy has become deeply aligned with national identity. As Homeira Moshirzadeh (2007: 529-533) argues, this is illustrated by the prominence of the discourses of 'independence', 'justice', and 'resistance' in the nuclear rhetoric. The *discourse of independence*, she explains, is based on memories of the Persian Empire; 'historical victimization by invaders', and the more recent history of manipulation by Western powers. It is in the vocabulary of this discourse that Iran's quest for nuclear self-sufficiency is articulated. Second, the *discourse of justice* derives partly from Iranian religious tradition, and partly from emancipatory ideals related to sovereign equality. It can be seen in the Iranian rejection of double standards and its appeals to its inalienable rights under the NPT. As for the third *discourse of resistance*, Moshirzadeh (2007: 536-537) notes that it began to define the nuclear issue only after 2005, as radical conservatives came to dominate the domestic scene, and as international pressure on Iran increased. This discourse highlights Iran's "non-submissive identity" which does not surrender to pressure. It is therefore not surprising that it emergence coincided with the imposition of the UN Security Council resolutions. During this time, resistance to the P5+1 demands turned into a virtue in the Iranian rhetoric. Accordingly, the subsequent hardships came to be viewed as sacrifices that further highlighted the symbolic value of Iran's nuclear achievements. At the same time, the nuclear dispute came to be framed as the latest manifestation of the old confrontation between the West and the Islamic Republic.[1]

The linkage between nuclear policy and national identity has obviously created political constraints limiting Iran's ability to make concessions in the nuclear talks. As President Rouhani put it in September 19, 2013, "mastering the atomic fuel cycle and generating nuclear power is as much about diversifying our energy resources as it is about who Iranians are as a nation". On the other hand, however, the same political constraints should also alleviate Western proliferation concerns: as part of the government's efforts to rally domestic support and gain international recognition for its nuclear policy, Iran has taken a firm stand against nuclear weapons by repeatedly denouncing them as un-Islamic. For example, according to Wyn Bowen and Matthew Moran (2014: 40) the international pressure following the public exposure of Iran's nuclear activities since 2002 "placed barriers in the way of pro-

1 As the former Foreign Minister Mottaki argued on March 24, 2007, "[j]ust as the Iranian nation paid a heavy price for the nationalization of its oil industry and its eight years of sacred defense, we realize that we must now be prepared to pay the price for our dignity and our independence".

gress towards the bomb", as Iran was "forced to fully engage with the peaceful nuclear narrative at the domestic level".

Western Fixation with the Bomb as Part of the Dynamics of Mistrust

Despite providing a sound alternative explanation for Iran's nuclear policy, the above-discussed rationales are rarely given serious attention in Western assessments on Iranian nuclear intentions. One reason for this is the historical amnesia about the past policy of technology denial, which is omitted from most accounts on the Iranian nuclear confrontation. This has led to an inclination to view the enrichment program itself as sufficient evidence of nuclear weapons ambitions. Even when Iran's bitter experiences with international nuclear partners are acknowledged, however, they tend to be dismissed as a 'cover story' (Erästö, 2014).

Ultimately, the Western tendency to view Iran intentions in the worst possible light can be traced to the same root cause that explains Khamenei's cynicism about US intentions: namely, the US-Iranian conflict. John Limbert (2009: 184 and 188), for example, has argued that, since the Iranian revolution, the US and Iranian perceptions of each other have been dominated by "mythology, distortion, grievance, and stereotype". The mutual enmity has been perpetuated by domestic politics: as Trita Parsi (2012: 6) notes, "too many forces [both in the US and Iran] calculate that they can better advance their own narrow interests by retaining the status quo, or the predictability of enmity is preferred to the unpredictability of peace-making".

The negative perceptions that dominate assessments of each side's intentions can be conceptualized in terms of what political psychologists call a 'cognitive' and 'motivated' bias. According to Robert Jervis (2006: 650-651), the former refers to the basic fact that "people tend to see what they expect to see"; they are predisposed to view a proposition as plausible when it is consistent with their more general beliefs, and that such "judgments of plausibility can be self-reinforcing". Motivational bias, on the other hand, means that "[b]eliefs may be rationalizations for policies as well as rationales for them". While Parsi's above quote implies a calculated efforts to demonize the other to serve particular interests, the concept of motivated bias refers to the "hesitancy to recognize painful value trade-offs, the... need for people to see that their policies will work, the impact on beliefs of goals and feelings of which people are unaware, and the propensity of people to infer their own beliefs from how they behave" (Jervis, 2006: 652-653).

Jervis (1968: 458-459) also explains that "the dilemma of how 'open' to be to new information is particularly central in decision-makers' attempts to estimate the intentions of other states". That dilemma is even more pronounced when assessing the intentions of adversaries, as actors "often feel they are 'playing it safe' to believe and act as though the other state were hostile in questionable cases" (Jervis, 1968: 475). Similarly, Deborah Welch Larson (2004: 42) notes that in international

politics "[d]istrust is often prudent, given the high costs of being betrayed, uncertainty about others' motives, and material incentives to lie or cheat". She also points to the difficulty of correcting misperceptions in such situations, as "[d]istrust inhibits one from engaging in the very behavior that might disprove it". Instead, "[b]eliefs that the other is untrustworthy color interpretation of his or her behavior", which is likely to get interpreted in a way that supports the existing beliefs. (Larson, 2004: 44-45) Such avoidance of political risks arguably goes a long way in explaining both sides' aversion to making significant concessions throughout much of the nuclear confrontation.

There are nevertheless certain well-known dangers to misperception related with excessive mistrust, the most obvious being self-fulfilling prophesy: by basing their actions on the logic of mistrust, decision-makers themselves engage in behavior which is likely to be perceived as threatening by the potential adversary, who then responds in a negative way (Larson, 2004: 47). Indeed, one of the most worrying aspects of the nuclear dispute arguably is the threats of military action against Iranian nuclear facilities that have been made based on a vague definition of what exactly would trigger such an attack: rather than preventing Iran's nuclear advancement, such a policy can be seen to have confirmed the wisdom of nuclear hedging[2] from the Iranian perspective.

However, bearing in mind what was said above about domestic constraints, it is highly unlikely that Iran would embark on a crash nuclear weapons program unless as a last resort in a time of war. One must also keep in mind the international repercussions of 'breakout'[3], as this would trigger not only a military response, but also likely put an end with nuclear cooperation with Russia. Finally, as a country whose revenue largely relies on the export of oil, Iran can ill afford any further international isolation.

Cracking the Wall of Mistrust

This part, looks at how the seemingly inescapable downward spiral of mutual mistrust began to be reversed in 2013. The change is explained in terms of a learning process whereby both sides acknowledged the need to reduce ambiguity about their own intentions.

2 Ariel Levite (2002) quoted in Bowen and Moran (2014) defines hedging is a "strategy of maintaining, or… appearing to maintain, a viable option for the relatively rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons, based on an indigenous technical capacity" to do so.

3 Although *breakout* is often used to refer to the time it would take to produce enough nuclear material for a nuclear bomb, Rauf and Kelley (2014) point out that traditionally it has meant "a sudden and unexpected move that gives [a state] a strategic advantage".

Failure of 'Confidence-Building' until Spring 2013

As noted before, in 2009 the diplomatic track was added to what had until then been an exclusively coercive approach by the P5+1. In line with Obama's campaign pledge to negotiate with Iran 'without preconditions', the P5+1 implicitly withdrew from previous demands regarding suspension and focused on limiting Iran's production and stockpiles of enriched uranium. The opportunity for this arose with Iran's request to the IAEA for higher enriched fuel that the country needed for medical purposes. In effect, the US, Russia, France, and the IAEA (the so-called Vienna group) proposed that 1200 kg of the Iranian LEU would be shipped to Russia for further enrichment, and then sent to France to be turned into fuel.

Despite the promising beginning, no agreement was eventually reached. In contrast to the original understanding that all LEU be removed at once, in the second meeting Iranians, appealing to their "lack of trust and their past experience", asked "to receive the fuel, manufactured from some other source of LEU", after which they would "release their own stockpile of enriched uranium" (ElBaradei, 2011: 307). This was to avoid waiting for a year for the other side to deliver the fuel. As a compromise, ElBaradei suggested that the IAEA would keep the Iranian LEU until the other side delivered their part. The fact that Iran also refused this possibility can be explained in terms of the polarization of Iranian domestic politics following the June 2009 election crisis, for now even moderates criticized the deal to damage Ahmadinejad (ElBaradei, 2011: 309).

When Iran subsequently began producing uranium enriched up to 20 percent on its own, the talks consequently focused on this activity and resulting stockpiles. In 2012 and spring 2013, Iran was asked to give away or neutralize those stockpiles and to suspend enrichment up to 20 percent, and also to halt all activities at the underground Fordo enrichment plant - a facility which Iran built in secret during the nuclear crisis as an insurance against military threats from Israel and the US (Erästö, 2014). In return, the P5+1 offered to help Iran build a new light water reactor; to deliver spare parts for its civilian airplanes; and, in the spring of 2013 at Almaty, Kazakhstan, to give modest relief from sanctions on trade in gold, metals and petrochemicals (Rozen, 9 June, 2013).

Iran viewed the above offers as imbalanced. As a former Iranian diplomat, Seyed Mousavian (2012: 191) explained at the time, the P5+1's were asking 'diamonds in return for peanuts'. An anonymous Iranian official, in turn, told the author in summer 2013 that the P5+1 2012 offer of spare parts and repairs for aircraft in exchange for Iranian nuclear concessions was "just crazy". A document in the same official's possession highlighted that the P5+1 were obliged under the NPT to deliver the elements that they were now offering as incentives. The document also noted that, in contrast to the strict demands made upon Iran, the wording of Western incentives was vague, serving to further "deepen the distrust and

uncertainty on the Iranian side" (Erästö, 2014). Arguably, the most significant gesture of confidence-building that was missing from the P5+1 proposals was the readiness to recognize Iran's right to enrichment. This would have provided a crucial indication about where the diplomatic process was heading: in the absence of such recognition, Iran had reason to suspect that nothing had really changed and that the P5+1 would just push for further concessions without genuine reciprocity.

Explaining the Success of the 2013 Interim Deal

There were, of course, several reasons for why the P5+1 refused to acknowledge Iran's right to enrichment. First, this was a question of principle as such recognition went against the P5+1's previous positions. Second, there was the persistent Western belief that coercion, rather than reciprocal concessions by the P5+1, would generate Iranian flexibility at the bargaining table. This belief reflects the asymmetric nature of the conflict: the Western position as the stronger party and the enforcer of law seemed to enable bargaining without significant concessions of their own. Third, there were formidable domestic obstacles in the US to explicitly accepting Iran's right to enrich. As the former American member of the P5+1 negotiating team, Robert Einhorn, explained to the author in summer 2013: "politically for the US it's not very easy to accept a domestic enrichment program in Iran," especially "before the Iranians had given any indication that they're prepared to accept real limitations" to their program. He also expressed the concern that this might embolden Iran to claim "an unqualified right to enrichment". At the same time, however, Einhorn explained that "[i]t's coming to the point where it would be advisable to explain to the Iranians what the end state would be" and "give [them] an indication of where this is heading" (Erästö, 2014). As it turned out, this was precisely what happened in the next round of talks: as part of the agreement on the JPOA in November 2013, the parties outlined the contours of a comprehensive deal, whereby the P5+1 explicitly stated their readiness to accept uranium enrichment in Iran. As indicated by Einhorn and another US official interviewed in summer 2013, this change of approach had to do with the acknowledgement that the previous P5+1 approach had not produced results (Erästö, 2014).

The JPOA can be seen as a result of learning on both sides. The preceding change in the P5+1 approach could be understood in terms of an adjustment in what Shmueli *et al* (2006: 212) call the 'Power, social control, and conflict management frames': as they argue, such frames are "amenable to shifts as stakeholders experience the failure of unilateral, power-based approaches and the potential of collaborative ones". On the Iranian side, the crucial change took place in the 2013 Presidential elections. The overwhelming victory of the moderate Rouhani reflected broad consensus in Iran that the confrontational style of President Ahmadinejad was not

helping. The resulting change in Iran's international image, in turn, made it easier for the US to justify its new approach and also to begin bilateral rapprochement with Iran. This process, together with the diplomatic efforts launched by the JPOA, has challenged many deeply-held negative assumptions on both sides. Most importantly, it has reinforced a positive reading of the situation, according to which at least the US administration seems to have prioritized non-proliferation over undermining the Iranian regime, and Iran might be more interested in nuclear self-sufficiency than the development of nuclear weapons.

Remaining Pitfalls for Diplomacy

Despite the significant progress on confidence-building described above, the process of reaching a comprehensive agreement to the dispute over Iran's nuclear program is still fraught with difficulties. Although exact details of the ongoing talks are not available at the time of writing, key issues of contention seem to be the level of enrichment in Iran, the timing of sanctions relief, as well as the duration of the comprehensive deal.

According to reports, Iran ultimately wants to have a large commercial enrichment program of 190 000 centrifuges but is prepared to accept the necessary transparency measures and safeguards, and also to keep enrichment to current levels (10,000 centrifuges) for nearly a decade. In line with the country's long-term goal of self-sufficiency, these plans are based on the assumption that the country will be able to completely master fuel production by the time that the comprehensive agreement expires. However, as Einhorn notes, this might not be a realistic goal. He writes that the Iranian expectation of being able to fabricate "highly specialized Bushehr fuel in such a short time period would be a huge technical challenge", whereas Russian fuel is "the more economical and safer choice" (Einhorn, 2014). Russia has promised to provide the fuel to the functioning reactor at Bushehr at least until 2021, and for two additional reactors until the end of their lifetime (Porter, 2014b), leaving Iran only with the limited need to produce its own LEU for a few research reactors.

At least for the duration of the comprehensive deal, the Obama administration has determined that it could live with a breakout time of maximum 6-12 months, on which basis it reportedly seeks to limit Iran's current program to a few thousand centrifuges for two decades. During this time, Iran would continue to rely on Russian fuel supplies. Interestingly, reports on the P5+1 positions normally do not refer to the time after the deal, leaving open the possibility that they could ultimately accept an Iran with an industrial-scale enrichment capacity. However, this is unlikely as long as Western thinking continues to be governed by breakout times: as Einhorn (2014) notes, the kind of industrial-scale capacity that Iran aspires for would mean that it would be able to produce enough material for one nuclear bomb in only a few weeks.

How valid are the current concerns on each side? The US focus on breakout times is based on the worst-case expectation that Iran will renege and embark on a crash program to produce a nuclear weapon. As argued in this article, this is an unlikely scenario. Even if one would find the interpretation of Iran's intentions presented here unconvincing, it is clear that the transparency measures built in a comprehensive deal would enable the early detection of any irregular activity by Iran, in which case the US and Israel would launch military action before Iran even had the time to build its first bomb. Reflective of the political nature of mistrust, the US and the rest of the international community has little concerns over Brazilian and Japanese enrichment programs over which they have much less oversight. The US position is therefore not understandable strictly from a non-proliferation perspective. Instead, it must be seen in terms of the need for consistency with previous positions, as well as an attempt to get the approval of allies and hardliners in the US Congress for a potential comprehensive deal.

As noted above, the Iranian position is also not completely logical, as the country will in any case continue to rely on Russian fuel at least in the near future. As far as the problem from the Iranian perspective has to do with the issue of holding on to current enrichment capacity, this would seem to be a position largely dictated by the need not to lose face domestically[4]. On the other hand, this position can be viewed as an insurance policy against uncertain future. After all, it is widely known that the P5+1's ability to deliver their part of the deal is undermined by reluctance by the US Congress to lift the sanctions against Iran's oil industry and Central Bank. Adding to Iran's uncertainty is the P5+1's apparent insistence to link the lifting of UN Security Council sanctions to the resolution in the IAEA process on PMDs, for there are no guarantees on how this process will end (Rauf and Kelley, 2014). If Iranian concessions were not reciprocated by sanctions relief, Iran would surely also back down from its commitments under any deal. This, in turn, could lead to unpredictable political circumstances, possibly also affecting Russo-Iranian nuclear cooperation. In such a situation, something close to the current enrichment capability could provide Iran with leverage to ensure uninterrupted cooperation with Russia, and to continue the pursuit of nuclear self-sufficiency.

Conclusions

This article has sought to explain Iran's insistence on maintaining its uranium enrichment capacity mainly in terms of mistrust and prestige, with particular focus on the former. In addition, it has explained why, for the most part of the nuclear dispute, Iranian concerns were not fully appreciated in the West. On the one hand, the tendency

4 Khamenei, on July 7, 2014, said that Iran needs 190,000 centrifuges in the long term.

to take the country's nuclear weapons ambitions for granted seemingly did away with the need to explore alternative explanations. There was also little reflection on the way in which previous Western actions—most notably the US policy of technology denial—influenced Iranian decisions. On the other hand, the lack of attention to Iranian concerns can be explained in terms of the asymmetric nature of the conflict: by virtue of their role as Security Council permanent members, the P5 for a long time assumed they could simply coerce Iran into compliance with their demands.

For both sides, expecting the worst and framing the situation accordingly has seemed prudent both in terms of minimizing the risks inherent in disproving mistrust, and by helping to garner support for controversial policies. The problem with worst-case assessments, however, is not simply that they do not represent the whole picture, but they can also distort and shape reality by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Arguably based on awareness of related dangers, in later years of the crisis the parties have sought to adopt a more pragmatic approach by reducing ambiguity about their own goals and by giving the benefit of the doubt to the other side. The most crucial step in this regard was arguably taken in 2013, as the P5+1 recognized Iran's right to enrichment. The resulting diplomatic process has challenged many deeply-held negative assumptions, suggesting that the conflict is not irreconcilable.

Although both sides have come a long way in addressing each other's concerns, old thinking patterns continue to cast a shadow on the prospects of a comprehensive solution. As long as such solution is not reached, the danger of a relapse to mutually reinforcing negative dynamics remains. This article associated much of remaining pitfalls for diplomacy with domestic politics in the US and Iran. These key dispute parties feel the pressure of appearing consistent with their previous positions. On the one hand this is a question of principle, but on the other hand based on practical considerations: If the P5+1 appear to give up too much, they will not get the necessary support for the deal from the US Congress and Israel. The fact that such support is far from guaranteed in any case can be seen to add to the Iranian reluctance to cut down its centrifuges, as they can be an insurance against an uncertain future.

What, then, are the prospects for a comprehensive deal? Compromise on centrifuge numbers should not be impossible to solve because positions on either side do not reflect any immediate concerns. The issue of sanctions relief, however, seems problematic. As the US Congress might seek to undermine any deal, it would be advisable to start sanctions relief from Security Council resolutions, as this is not dependent on Congress approval. Given the uncertainties with PMD issue and its irrelevance for the future, this process should be dissociated from UN sanctions. Iranian cooperation in response to the lifting of UN sanctions and those US sanctions under executive power could ultimately pave the way for removing oil and Central Bank sanctions even without Congressional opposition, for Europeans could always withdraw their support for them.

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