After Iran Gets the Bomb

Containment and Its Complications

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is determined to become the world’s tenth nuclear power. It is defying its international obligations and resisting concerted diplomatic pressure to stop it from enriching uranium. It has flouted several UN Security Council resolutions directing it to suspend enrichment and has refused to fully explain its nuclear activities to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Even a successful military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities would delay Iran’s program by only a few years, and it would almost certainly harden Tehran’s determination to go nuclear. The ongoing political unrest in Iran could topple the regime, leading to fundamental changes in Tehran’s foreign policy and ending its pursuit of nuclear weapons. But that is an outcome that cannot be assumed. If Iran’s nuclear program continues to progress at its current rate, Tehran could have the nuclear material needed to build a bomb before U.S. President Barack Obama’s current term in office expires.
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Iran's nuclearization would make the Middle East a more dangerous place: it would heighten tensions, reduce the margin for error, and raise the prospect of mass catastrophe. The international community should not let up on its efforts to stop Iran's progress. But given the mullahs' seeming indifference to the benefits of engagement, U.S. policymakers must consider now what to do if Iran does get the bomb.

Containment would be neither a perfect nor a foolproof policy. The task of foiling Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah would be difficult, as would countering Iran's support for terrorist and subversive groups in the region. The need to gain favor with Arab dictatorships would likely tempt Washington to shelve its calls for domestic political reforms in those countries—even though such reforms could diminish Iran's ability to meddle there by improving the lot of local minority Shiites who might otherwise be susceptible to Tehran's influence. Maintaining great-power support for pressure on Iran could require overlooking objectionable Chinese and Russian behavior on other matters. Containment would not be a substitute for the use of force. To the contrary, its very success would depend on the willingness of the United States to use force against Iran or threaten to do so should Tehran cross Washington's redlines. Applying pressure without a commitment to punishing infractions is a recipe for failure—and for a more violent and dangerous Middle East.

Containment could buy Washington time to persuade the Iranian ruling class that the revisionist game it has been playing is simply not worth the candle. Thus, even as Washington pushes to counter Iran, it should be open to the possibility that Tehran's calculations might change. To press Tehran in the right direction, Washington should signal that it seeks to create an order in the Middle East that is peaceful and self-sustaining. The United States will remain part of the region's security architecture for the foreseeable future, but it need not maintain an antagonistic posture toward Iran. An Islamic Republic that abandoned its nuclear ambitions, accepted prevailing international norms, and respected the sovereignty of its neighbors would discover that the United States is willing to work with, rather than against, Iran's legitimate national aspirations.

QUESTIONS:

1. Name two reasons why containment is not a "foolproof policy."

2. What two "signals" must the U.S. send to Tehran—according to the authors?