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Iran's 'perfect storm'

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Is the Persian proverb "Don't do the worst you can to your enemy, for perchance he may become your friend" relevant to Iran's challenge to the international community?

Make no mistake. The recent Iranian test launch of a rocket for eventually carrying its first domestically built satellite into orbit is another important phase in the Islamic Republic's technological progress. It is no secret that Tehran has pursued a space program for many years confirming its strategic ambition to play a dominant role regionally.

What is of growing international concern is the reality that Iran's advanced satellite launching technology could also be used for launching missiles carrying biological, chemical or nuclear warheads. Moreover, Iran continues to test and may already have an arsenal of Shahab-3 missiles with a range that could be deployed against its perceived adversaries in the Middle East such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and targets in Europe.

Iran now has about 3,500 centrifuges in operation or being tested at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant and is moving aggressively to construct more centrifuge machines, get them running at full capacity and introduce more advanced designs. The United States and other countries are concerned that Iran could expel International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors at the Natanz plant and quickly reconfigure the centrifuge machines there into producing enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear bomb by as early as 2010.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran continues painting himself into a corner, helped by his frequent public tirades denying the Holocaust and calling for the destruction of Israel. Whether he speaks at the behest of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who, as a Shia cleric, believes a period of universal chaos will herald the return of the "Hidden Imam" and a Islamic utopia on Earth, or as a populist politician trying to rouse support, Israel may see no option short of a strike on Iran's key nuclear facilities.

Moreover, Mr. Ahmadinejad's derisive comments on the futility of the recent offer by the United States, France, Britain, Germany, Russia and China to jump start negotiations for a comprehensive settlement of the nuclear program only fans the flames of those who want to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities, as unwise as that might be. The offer, made in June, would lift sanctions on Iran for a short time in return for a halt by Iran in building new centrifuges while diplomats meet to set future talks on course. "They have climbed down," Mr. Ahmadinejad said, from their demands for a complete halt in uranium enrichment.

The major powers are now fashioning a fourth round of U.N. Security Council sanctions against Iran for continuing its uranium centrifuge enrichment activities. Also new unilateral sanctions have been imposed by the U.S. and the European Union on Iranian organizations and banks connected to its uranium enrichment and ballistic missile programs.

Israel continues to assert that it reserves the right to take whatever action is necessary to halt Iran's nuclear activities if diplomatic efforts fail, though high Bush administration officials have warned Israel that attacking Iranian nuclear sites would undermine U.S. efforts for a diplomatic solution.

The U.S. is reported to have rejected Israel's request to supply military equipment and support for an attack on Iranian nuclear sites. Nevertheless, Washington has agreed to fund development of Israel's Arrow-3 ballistic missile defense system, to counter any missile launches from Iran, and the Iron Dome system, to intercept short-range missiles launched from Lebanon by Hezbollah.

Would the promise of these new and upgraded defense systems give Israel a false sense of security? Israel may not want to wait any longer while Iran builds more centrifuges. It may decide to act alone in attacking Natanz, Esfahan, Arak and others of a multitude of Iranian nuclear facilities.

Indeed, Israel may be over-confident enough to launch a two-pronged attack - the first on Iran and the second on Hezbollah command facilities in Lebanon to right the outcome of the 2006 war and weaken Hezbollah's military and political influence in Lebanon.

Well-thought-out or not, Israel may be unstoppable, unless the Western nations act quickly and decisively to open comprehensive talks with Iran. The announced plan for a U.S. interests section in Tehran is a good first step, but more must be done, and urgently. If Iran's nuclear program remains unchecked, coupled with its space and missile advancements, a "perfect storm" may become a tragic reality.

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