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Make Teheran an offer

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HIGHLIGHT: Genuine incentives can prevent a country that promotes suicide terrorism from posing a nuclear threat. Alexander is a professor and director of the Potomac's International Center for Terrorism Studies. Swiecki is a captain in the US Army currently in Georgetown University's Masters Program for Policy Management.

The risk of nuclear terrorism from Iran has never been greater. Our assessment is based on the two factors: Firstly, Teheran has shown a commitment to jihad and shahada (self-sacrifice). For instance, in January Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, praised the culture of shahada and called upon the younger generation to follow the path of martyrdom because "this is the most beautiful human value."

Plainly, the suicide weapon is central to Iran's arsenal of terrorism. That arsenal is currently conventional, but it will ultimately become unconventional.

The second disturbing factor is the regime's decision to actively pursue a policy of nuclear development. Iran has repeatedly claimed that its atomic project is designed as a peaceful undertaking and will never be diverted to weapons production.

However, Iran's nuclear infrastructure, consisting of six known sites, must be coupled with the very real possibility that it also maintains a clandestine program. The regime's overall behavior should tell the world that there are no objective guarantees Teheran will not construct atomic weapons.

Iran's apparent intention to create a military application for its nuclear program, coupled with its traditional use of suicide terrorism abroad, makes it possible - if not probable - that the regime might deploy the ultimate weapon: a primitive dirty device or a more sophisticated bomb using a terrorist proxy.

So the questions are: Can the United States and like-minded nations deny Iran nuclear capabilities - or their utilization as terrorist weapons? Is a military response to such a threat a realistic option for the United States or other countries?

IRAN IS not Iraq, where Baghdad's nuclear program at Osirak was destroyed in June 1981 by an Israeli air strike. Even if Israel and the US were to decide to mount air strikes against multiple Iranian nuclear targets the challenge would be Herculean.

After all, Iran has already deployed advanced air defense systems to guard its nuclear sites; they are dispersed and underground, making potential air strikes difficult and without any guarantees of success. Moreover, any air attack would prove to Teheran that its conventional defense capabilities are too weak to protect itself from an "aggressive" external threat, leading the regime to accelerate its nuclear weapons program.

The more drastic military course of action would be a cross-border invasion of the US or coalition land forces. However, the danger of such extreme military intervention is that it would likely elicit international outrage, incur high casualties and create a much longer period of intense, widespread insurgency than experienced in Iraq. It would also result in continued strain on the overall US military infrastructure and its available resources. Whether any such operation could be sustained over the long haul is anyone's guess.

So what is to be done?

Two parallel, nonmilitary actions, are called for:

* First, allow Iran to keep its nuclear power plants if Teheran agrees to stop its uranium enrichment program. In exchange, Iran would be guaranteed outside sources of nuclear fuel.

* Second, secure a pledge from Iran to stop sponsoring terrorism. In exchange, Iran should be offered a massive commitment of foreign investment in the range of a billion dollars - enough to generate genuine economic development in the country.

Such incentives are realistic in light of the administration's recent policy shift in supporting the efforts of the G-3 European nations (Britain, Germany and France) as they pursue a policy that "engages" rather than confronts Iran over its nuclear program.

The world community has one more diplomatic opportunity, particularly after Iran's presidential elections on June 17, to prevent the Iranians from being in a position to employ nuclear terrorism.

If Iran refuses to cooperate within a reasonable time- frame, the United Nations Security Council should consider smart sanctions as well as military options. The carrot- and-stick approach of both incentives and punishments will suffice for the moment. Iran's prime concern is national self-preservation.

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