

Report from the Field

The Carrot or Stick Approach: Considerations After the June 2013 IAEA Board of Governors Meetings for the Iranian Nuclear Program

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The IAEA Board of Governors generally meets five times per year: in March and June, twice in September (before and after the General Conference), and in December. This year happens to be when the Canadian Ambassador to the IAEA, H.E. John Barrett, holds the chairmanship. The author was present at the week-long June meetings to get a first-person point of view of the official statements, diplomatic wrangling, and rhetorical posturing. This report analyzes in particular the emerging diplomatic developments concerning the Iranian nuclear issue. In the context of this meeting and the ongoing negotiations of the P5+1, this article aims to address the sense of urgency surrounding the issue.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Board of Governors (BoG) convened for the second time this year in Vienna, Austria from June 3 to June 7 to discuss a number of issues. The topics on the agenda included: the strengthening of the Agency's technical cooperation activities; boosting the Agency's activities related to nuclear, radiation, transport, and waste safety; and nuclear verification, including the Application of Safeguards in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and Relevant Provisions of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Syrian Arab Republic (IAEA 2013).

Throughout the week these matters were addressed, with some receiving more attention and spurring more debate than others. No issue was nearly as contentious, however, as the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program. The discussion on Iran produced a

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pronounced diplomatic chasm that remained throughout the week. Diplomats exchanged vitriolic condemnations of each other's perceived manipulation of the facts and accused one another of an unwillingness to negotiate in good faith.

As Iran is currently the Non-Aligned Movement's (NAM) chair, the nation is allowed to speak for the consortium of 120 states (with an additional 17 observer states). Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, expressed "sincere appreciation [...] for the indispensable sustainable support of the family members of the Non-Aligned Movement" (Soltanieh, 2013). However, disagreements concerning the voluntary versus compulsory nature of the Additional Protocol (which gives IAEA inspectors greater access) and the role of the IAEA in nuclear disarmament verification have in recent years affected the negotiation of the safeguards resolution (Mukhatzhanova 2013).

Despite the representation of extensive support, the NAM has not been as united in endorsing the actual text of the resolution, with several states abstaining. This is indicative of the Movement's diversity and variety of positions among its members and observers. On highly political and controversial issues, the NAM may not be as powerful a voting bloc as the membership numbers suggest (Mukhatzhanova 2013).

The NAM's chair currently faces an unyielding opposition: specifically, the United States, Israel, Canada, and the European Union, who have accused Iran of breaching six UNSC Resolutions and 12 binding Resolutions of the IAEA Board of Governors, among other condemnations. At the meeting, the accusations were urgent in content and tone. For example, the United States expressed that, "[it is] deeply troubled that Iran claims the IR-40 heavy water reactor at Arak could be commissioned as soon as early 2014," and that, "The window of opportunity [to negotiate] will not remain open indefinitely" (Macmanus 2013).

Judging from the many condemnations throughout the event, one would conclude that Iran is on the cusp of developing enough highly-enriched U-235 for a nuclear bomb at its Fordow enrichment plant in Qom, or weapons-grade plutonium at Arak, within a few months. In the same vein, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's speech to the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee this past March, as well as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to the UN General Assembly this past October, were centred on the urgency of defusing the Iranian nuclear program. Netanyahu and Biden focussed on Iranian's vast and feverish nuclear effort, narrowing windows of diplomatic opportunity, and the inability of big nations to bluff, making it appear as though Iranian nuclear crisis was approaching its critical mass.

Furthermore, IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano's introductory statement to the BoG

noted that the number of centrifuges installed by Iran also continues to increase, as does the amount of enriched uranium it holds (Amano 2013). These warnings, along with others from the Israeli, American, and Canadian delegations, denoted a fixed impending deadline or a calculable date when the Iranian nuclear program will reach weaponization capacity. In line with the vocal warnings of Israel and the U.S., should the international community expect Iran to become the tenth nuclear-weapon state in the very near future?

Such a conclusion would be hasty in light of recent technical and political developments, regardless of the concurrent brash rhetoric. The nuclear program has not progressed in a linear trajectory, nor does it have to continue in this manner. Because there is no evidence that Iran has built additional covert enrichment plants since the Natanz and Qom sites were outed in 2002 and 2009, any near-term move by Tehran to produce weapons-grade uranium would have to rely on its declared facilities (Kahl 2012). Such developments would provide a newfound level of legitimacy to supporters of a pre-emptive attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. The IAEA would thus detect such activity with sufficient time for the international community to mount a forceful response. As a result, Iran is unlikely to commit to building nuclear weapons until the country can make them much more quickly or out of sight, which could be years away (Ibid).

Until then, the Iranian nuclear program appears to be in a holding pattern of sorts. Although IAEA inspectors who visited Iranian nuclear facilities this summer observed the installation of hundreds of new centrifuges in the two different facilities the country uses to make low-enriched uranium, the facilities had also converted more of their uranium stockpile to a metal form that is all but rendered useless for weapons purposes (Warrick 2013). Moreover, from the IAEA's last Board of Governors Safeguards Report on Iran in February of this year, Iran appears to be deliberately capping its highly enriched-uranium stockpile, which is the final atomic substance required for a nuclear weapon (IAEA 2013). To be noted, their current level is below the infamous "red-line" presented by Netanyahu at the 2012 General Assembly.

In another possible sign of deliberate de-escalation, IAEA inspectors confirmed that Iran still has yet to begin operating hundreds of centrifuges installed recently at Fordow (IAEA 2013). Iran is currently focused on increasing the volume of its low-enriched uranium production. However, this essentially flatlines the technical development of the nuclear program in terms of reaching weaponization. This does not mean that Iran cannot make a sudden sprint for the last remaining materials necessary for a nuclear bomb, but it does demonstrate a shift in the country's trajectory towards substantial highly-enriched uranium development.

As Matthew Kroenig argues, the U.S. should launch an attack only if Iran takes certain

actions, such as expelling IAEA inspectors or ramping up work on its reactor in Arak, that would signal that it had decided to complete the final stages of building a nuclear weapon (Kroenig 2012). Until then, the international community can capitalize on the implications of the slowdown as a result of exogenous pressure. While the Iranian regime can continue to save face by increasing the production of its low-enriched uranium stores, new rounds of talks with the P5+1 (the U.S., the United Kingdom, Russia, China, France, and Germany), which began on October 14 and will resume on November 20 in Geneva, provide a diplomatic opportunity to reach concessions. As crippling sanctions continue to strangle the Iranian economy, the P5+1 have powerful bargaining leverage. For example, the loosening of sanctions may be exchanged for reduced or halted uranium production in the fortified and secretive Fordow facility. This would mean that the IAEA would have access to the remaining major nuclear facilities: the uranium and IR-40 heavy water production facilities in Natanz and Arak, respectively. The resulting transparency and increased IAEA oversight would render Israeli or American sabre-rattling unnecessary and place a renewed focus on multilateral negotiations. This could allow for a continuation of the Geneva talks towards a road map and possibly a subsequent resolution.

Based on the statements and findings from the June IAEA BoG meetings in Vienna, Iran's ability to preserve its pride while not inviting a pre-emptive strike by focusing primarily on low-enriched uranium production means that factors are favourable for a potential peaceful settlement. Military engagement in the near-future would squander a rare opportunity to resolve the issue diplomatically. Significant economic pressure on Iran has motivated the regime's officials to approach the negotiating table. One should hope that the alleviation of sanctions in exchange for meaningful structural changes can be as successful as the dismantlement of the Libyan nuclear program, which culminated out of similar circumstances. Only time will tell if negotiations in the next few months will lead to fruitful results, but the possibility of small gains leading to a grand bargain is more likely than ever.

Finally, there are policy implications resulting from the June IAEA BoG meeting for Canada to consider. Up until now, the Obama administration has struggled to convince members of the Senate Foreign Relations and Banking committees to reconsider imposing a new round of sanctions on Iran until after the end of the delicate negotiations process. At this time, Netanyahu is aligned with the U.S. Senate's "Iran hawks," who are taking a hardline position and insisting that any deal short of a complete halt to uranium enrichment would be a grievous, historic error (Richer 2013).

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird have repeatedly stressed the Canadian government's commitment to the state of Israel. In 2012 Baird declared Iran the biggest threat to global security while shuttering the Canadian embassy in Tehran and ejecting Iranian diplomats from Canada. Netanyahu was quick to praise

Canada's action, calling it a bold leadership move that sent a clear message to Iran (Palmer, Ljunggren 2012). However, if Canada wishes to make its national interest in regional stability a priority over scoring easy political points, Harper ought to use his tight-knit relationship with Israel to discourage Netanyahu from attempting to derail the P5+1 negotiations. Our government should privately emphasize to Israel and the U.S. that we support a temporarily delay on sanctions for Iran—not as appeasement, but as sensible foreign policy determined by clear-eyed pragmatism.

Ending the 34-year Cold War between America and Iran would improve Canadian relations with the U.S.—our closest ally, and a state that wields sizeable influence in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, terrorism, energy security, and nuclear proliferation (Friedman 2013). The tremendous importance of these national, regional, and international security interests cannot be overstated. Thus, Canada should align itself with the P5+1 in its efforts to maintain momentum with unhindered negotiations that may ultimately yield a historical agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue.

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