
The Washington Post

Stopping a Nuclear Tehran

By Daniel R. Coats and Charles S. Robb

Thursday, October 23, 2008

It is likely that the first and most pressing national security issue the next president will face is the growing prospect of a nuclear-weapons-capable Iran. After co-chairing a recently concluded, high-level task force on Iranian nuclear development, we have come to believe that five principles must serve as the foundation of any reasonable, bipartisan and comprehensive Iranian policy.

First, an Islamic Republic of Iran with nuclear weapons capability would be strategically untenable. It would threaten U.S. national security, regional peace and stability, energy security, the efficacy of multilateralism, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. While a nuclear attack is the worst-case scenario, Iran would not need to employ a nuclear arsenal to threaten U.S. interests.

Simply obtaining the ability to quickly assemble a nuclear weapon would effectively give Iran a nuclear deterrent and drastically multiply its influence in Iraq and the region. While we would welcome cooperation from a democratic Iran, allowing the Middle East to fall under the dominance of a radical clerical regime that supports terrorism should not be considered a viable option.

Second, we believe the only acceptable end state is the complete cessation of enrichment activities inside Iran. We foresee no combination of international inspections or co-ownership of enrichment facilities that would provide sufficient assurances that Iran is not producing weapons-grade fissile material.

Indeed, the enrichment facility at Natanz is already technically capable -- once Iran has a sufficient stockpile of low-enriched uranium -- of producing enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear device in four weeks. That is more than fast enough to elude detection by international inspectors.

Furthermore, the U.N. Security Council on three occasions has called for the cessation of enrichment in Iran, and the International Atomic Energy Agency found Iran to be noncompliant with the NPT. The failure to enforce these mandates could be a fatal blow to the fragile international regime.

Third, while a diplomatic resolution is still possible, it can succeed only if we negotiate from a position of strength. This will require better coordination with our international partners and much stricter sanctions. Negotiations with Iran would probably be ineffective unless our European allies sever commercial relations with Tehran.

In addition to constructing alliances, it will be important to build leverage. Much could be done to strengthen U.S. financial sanctions -- whether by closing loopholes or using more powerful instruments, such as Section 311 of the Patriot Act, to deny Iranian banks access to the U.S. financial system.

If such a strategy succeeds in bringing Iran to the table, it is important that the United States and its allies set a timetable for negotiations. Otherwise, the Iranians may seek to delay until they achieve a nuclear weapons capability.

Fourth, so that Israel does not feel compelled to take unilateral action, the next president must credibly convince Jerusalem that the United States will not allow Iran to achieve nuclear weapons capability.

Fifth, while military action against Iran is feasible, it must remain an option of last resort. If all other approaches fail, the new president would have to weigh the risks of a failure to impede Iran's nuclear program sufficiently against the risks of a military strike. The U.S. military is capable of launching a devastating strike on Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure -- probably with more decisive results than the Iranian leadership realizes.

An initial air campaign would probably last up to several weeks and would require vigilance for years to come. Military action would incur significant risks, including the possibility of U.S. and allied losses, wide-scale terrorist reprisals against Israel and other nations, and heightened unrest in the region.

Both to increase our leverage over Iran and to prepare for a military strike, if one were required, the next president will need to begin building up military assets in the region from day one.

These principles are all supported unanimously by a politically diverse task force that was assembled by the **Bipartisan Policy Center**. The group, which includes former senior Democratic and Republican officials, retired four-star generals and admirals, and experts in nuclear proliferation and energy markets, offers a clear path for constructing an enduring, bipartisan consensus behind an effective U.S. policy on Iran.

It is crucial that, immediately after Election Day, Congress and the president-elect begin to work on the exceedingly difficult policy measures that will be required if the United States is to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons capability. Time may be shorter than many imagine, and failure could carry a catastrophic cost to the national interest.

*Daniel R. Coats, a former Republican senator from Indiana, and Charles S. Robb, a former Democratic senator from Virginia, are co-chairmen of the **Bipartisan Policy Center's** national security task force on Iran.*