

On Iran, no news is good news for U.S.

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The IAEA's latest report on the Iranian civilian nuclear programme will take the wind out of the sails of the war party in Washington. It suggests Tehran might be telling the truth about not having worked as extensively on its centrifuge designs as the Anglo-American bloc alleges it has.

The Natanz uranium enrichment facility in Iran.

Somewhere along the line, between the blur of sanctions and the threat of war, the world has forgotten what the Iranian nuclear crisis is really all about.

The 'crisis' does not revolve around Iranian defiance of the United Nations Security Council's demand that all uranium enrichment, reprocessing, and heavy water-related activities be suspended immediately. Rather, it is about the underlying question that led to the Iranian file being sent to the UNSC in the first place. And that question is the following: Does Iran have any undeclared nuclear facilities which the world and the International Atomic Energy Agency do not know about and where, presumably, work is being carried out on a secret weapons programme?

Any non-nuclear weapon state that is party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is required to adhere to one principal obligation — to not develop or manufacture nuclear weapons. In order to implement this obligation, all nuclear facilities in that country have to be safeguarded by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which ensures the country is not diverting nuclear material for any prohibited purpose. The import of nuclear material is supposed to be reported to the agency in a timely manner, as are any experiments or research projects involving the use of source or fissionable material.

The Additional Protocol, which embodies obligations not included in the standard IAEA safeguards agreement, further requires that there be no undeclared nuclear activities in the country. Iraq, prior to the first Gulf war, had a fully safeguarded nuclear programme, but it also developed unknown to the IAEA facilities where weapons research was being conducted. The Additional Protocol emerged in response to the challenge posed by Iraq's clandestine weapons programme. It was believed that granting the IAEA enhanced access to physical locations and documentation could help establish the absence of undeclared nuclear activity and material in a country.

Iran, like many NPT signatories, has not yet ratified the Additional Protocol but undertook, in 2003, voluntarily to adhere to its provisions. Iran withdrew its voluntary adherence in February 2006, following the decision of the IAEA Board of Governors to refer its file to the U.N. Security Council. During the intervening period, however, it provided information to the Agency that helped the latter discover a number of instances going back to the 1980s of

Iranian failure to declare or provide information about certain nuclear imports and experiments.

These failures were serious but not consequential and by 2005 the IAEA said it was able to close the file on most of them. None of these failures suggested the existence of a hidden nuclear weapons programme. Moreover, the one issue which American officials and propagandists most often speak about — the construction of a hidden enrichment facility at Natanz — was not a violation of Iran's safeguards agreement. Indeed, at no point has the IAEA characterised the facility as such.

Once Iran announced its adherence to the Additional Protocol, the IAEA was mandated not only to certify that no safeguarded material in Iran was being used for military purposes but also that there were no undeclared nuclear facilities anywhere in the country. At the best of times, implementing the second mandate is time consuming and complicated. One of the questions the IAEA sought an answer for during its work to establish a complete history of the Iranian nuclear programme was when precisely did fabrication work seriously begin on the P-1 and P-2 centrifuge designs. The P-2 drawings were acquired by Iran in 1996 but Tehran insisted it never began work on the P-2 until 2002. The discrepancy was important only to the extent to which one might assume Iran used the six years to master the P-2 manufacturing process and set up a hidden enrichment facility somewhere. No one — not even the U.S. or Britain with sophisticated intelligence gathering capabilities at their disposal — has said such a facility actually exists but prudence suggested the IAEA do what it could to verify the truth of Tehran's claims.

Major obstacle

It is important to remember that in September 2005 — when the IAEA Board of Governors first declared Tehran in breach of its safeguard obligations — and then again in February 2006, when it sent the file to the U.N., the only major outstanding obstacle in the way of the Agency certifying the absence of undeclared nuclear activities in Iran was this ambiguity about the extent of prior work on the P-2 centrifuge. Two other minor issues got added along the way. The first was Iran's disclosure to the IAEA after September 2005 that it had received an unsolicited document from the A.Q. Khan network in 1987 about the casting of uranium in hemispherical shapes. The Americans immediately claimed this was the smoking gun which proved Iran had a weapons programme. The second was the claim by the U.S. of information suggesting the Iranian military was conducting research on a nuclear-capable missile as well as on uranium conversion. Tehran protested its innocence on both counts.

Once the IAEA revealed it had been shown the uranium document by the Iranians (rather than being 'discovered'), the U.S. changed tack and demanded that Tehran hand over the drawings and plans. For more than a year, Iran refused to do this out of fear that the document would be used by the U.S. for propaganda purposes as 'proof' that Tehran was secretly working on a bomb. But then last week, in a change of tactic, the Iranians relented and handed over a copy of the document.

In line with the 'work plan' developed between Iran and the IAEA in August, the Iranians also appear finally to be making a serious effort to answer the outstanding question about the P-2. Indeed, IAEA director general Mohammed el-Baradei's latest report on Iran dated November 15, 2007 acknowledges the progress being made and notes in several places that the additional information Iran had provided to back up its claims on the P-2 was

“consistent” with the information gleaned by the IAEA from its investigation of the supplier end of the Khan network. “Based on visits made by Agency inspectors to the P-2 workshop in 2004, examination of the company owner’s contract [handed over on November 5, 2007], progress reports and logbooks, and information available on procurement enquiries,” Mr. el-Baradei’s report states, “the Agency has concluded that Iran’s statements on the content of the declared P-2 R&D activities are consistent with the Agency’s findings. Environmental samples taken at declared R&D locations and from equipment did not indicate that nuclear material was used in these experiments.”

The language is cautious but the import is clear: there is every likelihood that Iran is telling the truth about not having worked on the P-2 till 2002. If this conclusion is eventually upheld, perhaps by the time the IAEA’s next report on Iran is issued in March 2008, the Agency ought to have no major problem certifying the absence of undeclared nuclear facilities inside the country. In turn, that would render the UNSC’s demand for the suspension of enrichment activity infructuous and irrelevant.

Given the concern President George W. Bush and his colleagues have shown at the prospect of Iran developing nuclear weapons, one might imagine the IAEA’s latest report would be seen as good news in Washington. In reality, the war party sees the report as a threat to its plans to up the ante against Iran. The Bush administration has already unveiled tougher unilateral sanctions and the U.S. Congress has pushed a new law, the Iran Counterproliferation Act, which aims to target countries such as Russia for cooperating with Tehran in the nuclear field. Behind closed doors, military planners are also developing scenarios for aggression.

Though the administration is divided on the use of force, both the hawks and ‘doves’ within the system see the IAEA’s pro-activeness as an irritant. That is why the official spin from Washington, London, and Paris will be to downplay Iranian cooperation on the P-2 and uranium casting document issues and emphasise Tehran’s non-compliance with the UNSC demand that enrichment activities be suspended. Dr. el-Baradei’s report notes that close to 3,000 centrifuges are up and running, though not at optimum capacity. But it also stresses that the uranium being enriched is only up to 4 per cent — hardly the stuff bombs are made of — and is fully accounted for within the safeguards system.

No immediate or remote threat is posed by this enrichment. The international community would be foolish to destabilise the work the IAEA and Iran are doing to resolve the “core issue” of the P-2 because of a derivative issue like non-compliance with the suspension fatwa. Indeed, to the extent to which it is in everyone’s interest that Iran resume its voluntary adherence to the Additional Protocol, the UNSC should suspend its sanctions and return the Iranian file to the IAEA in exchange for that adherence.

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