Iran as a Nuclear Threshold Country

One of the main points of emphasis during the Herzliya Conference concerned the dangers and political, strategic, and security implications of a nuclear Iran. Although this topic has been widely discussed and its significance well understood, one of the panels at the Conference took a unique approach in analyzing Iran as a potential nuclear power.

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The panelists, who spoke of Iran’s nuclear capabilities, focused on the idea of a nuclear threshold, how it can be passed, the reasons for pursuing such a path, and the resulting strategic implications for the region and the rest of the world. Professor Francois Heisbourg, the Chairman for the International Institute for Strategic Studies and of the Geneva Center for Security Policy, defined a nuclear threshold country as one that is “…producing weapons-grade uranium and/or plutonium…and [is] ready to test and use the device.” He believes that while Iran isn’t a threshold country, it’s coming close to being one;

Francois Heisbourg [photo: Yotam From]

situations in which a threshold stage is [a place] where you stay.” He offered Israel as an example of a country that adopted a strategy of nuclear opacity, but gave reasons as to why such a policy would be extremely difficult for Iran to pursue. The question of whether or not Iran is capable of embarking on a course of nuclear opacity is important, especially given the regional situation and the rivalry for regional hegemony among the Arab states. It is also significant when monitoring Iran’s progress in this area and keeping up with the actions it takes towards acquiring nuclear capabilities.

Tim Guldimann [photo: Yotam From]

Heisbourg also spoke about two different paths by which to become nuclear, making a distinction between crossing the threshold and sitting on it. “In the case of all overt nuclear weapons states, the threshold stage has been a transition stage,” said Heisbourg, “but there are some

Tim Guldimann, the former Swiss Ambassador to Iran, opened the discussion by addressing Iran’s intentions regarding its potential to produce a nuclear bomb. “Iran is able to produce a nuclear bomb within one to two years,” stated Guldimann, “but we don’t know what Tehran intends to do. We must work on assumptions.”
He outlined two primary assumptions, the first being that although Iran desires nuclear capability, it seeks to develop its nuclear industry to the point of being able to produce the bomb. There are a number of reasons as to why Iran would want nuclear capability without the bomb; they include boosting national prestige, achieving scientific progress, increasing security and military capabilities, and possessing a possible bargaining chip. The second assumption, which most people probably believe, is that Iran has a clear intention to produce the bomb and use it to threaten the region. Such an assumption could be supported by Iran’s development of a missile system; however, there is no convincing evidence that this assumption is true. Guldimann adhered to the first assumption, citing Iran’s recent willingness to comply with the UN proposal of sending its uranium supply abroad for further enrichment. Furthermore, he noted the dangers of acting on the second assumption, which could probably lead to unnecessary consequences; such an action “…would bring assumption A [the first] to assumption B [the latter]…An external attack would stabilize the regime and would consolidate Ahmadinejad’s power.” Guldimann stated that if the United States or Israel were to carry out a military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities, then the world would know for a fact that any further pursuit of nuclear capability by Iran would be undoubtedly for the purpose of accruing a bomb.

Mr. Gideon Frank, the Vice Chairman of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, offered a counter-argument to Guldimann’s assumption that Iran doesn’t necessarily wish to gain a nuclear bomb. He emphasized the fact that Iran wants deterrence, recognizing that the only deterrent to the United States is a nuclear weapon. The United States invaded Iraq even when the US sincerely believed that Iraq had biological weapons and other weapons of mass destruction- but not nuclear weapons. Therefore, nuclear weapons are the only thing that could deter US aggression. In addition to acquiring such international stability vis-à-vis the US, Iran wishes to project power in the region and impose its will on her neighbors; the only way that Iran could do this is by crossing the threshold.

Not only does Iran desire a nuclear weapon for practical purposes, but it also believes that is has a right to nuclear weapons as a great nation with a great history. “Being a nuclear power,” asserted Frank, “is a signature of being a power today.” Frank continued by stating that, “There is no reason in [Iran’s] eyes that Pakistan, India, China, and Israel should be nuclear powers and it shouldn’t be.”

Dr. Patrick Cronin, Senior Advisor and Senior Director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program, extrapolated on Professor Heisbourg’s discussion about Iran as a nuclear threshold state. “Whether Iran is just approaching the threshold or preparing to cross it, there are four sets of problems.” The problems he
mentioned include the ensuing proliferation in regional countries that a nuclear Iran would create, an additional conventional arms race that would occur below the nuclear level, serious questions regarding effective command and control, and a general increase in nuclear arms supplies in the global market. The last point is particularly crucial in light of the radical, anti-Western ambitions of terror organizations like Al-Qaeda. In addition to listing these problems, Cronin also discussed policy strategies available for effectively contending with such a threat. “The Obama Administration has engaged Iran for a year, and has now seen the limits of engagement in a very big way,” stated Cronin, who went on to argue that more policy options are needed besides sanctions and military strikes.

One of his suggestions reflected the policy recommendations articulated in a recent document released out of Washington that stressed the need for geographical containment. Economic sanctions aren’t enough, and a comprehensive containment strategy would include a geographical and physical element as well. Cronin also emphasized the need to support the revolutionary movement in Iran. Furthermore, he recognized an important psychological element: if the US and its allies succeed in a place like Afghanistan, then morale would increase and success would be more likely. He summed up his speech by proposing a countermove that the West should undertake: “If Iran insists on living on the threshold of nuclear weapons, we must keep it on the threshold of isolation, if not regime change.”