

A 'Disarmament War' Against Iran Will Fail

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On Friday, Iran is scheduled to meet with representatives of China, France, Russia, Britain and the United States — the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council — plus Germany, the so-called "P5+1" in an effort to decide the fate of Iran's nuclear program. Meanwhile, North Korea is reportedly preparing its third nuclear test, as if to provide a discordant sound track for the talks.

If the talks fail and military action against Iran becomes more likely, no one should be surprised. Over the past decade, a new kind of war has been invented: a war designed to stop a country from obtaining nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction.

The first "disarmament war" was the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Its goal, spelled out plainly by U.S. President George W. Bush's administration to the Security Council and the U.S. Congress, was to destroy Iraq's stockpiles and production facilities of weapons of mass destruction. Of course, as it turned out, no such stockpiles or facilities were found, and the

war proved to be an exercise in bloody futility.

This experience illustrates one of the great drawbacks of the use of force as a tool of disarmament. An attack must be timed to perfection, and it must be launched after the weapons of mass destruction programs are in operation and evident but before they have produced any weapons. If the attack comes too early — or if, as in Iraq, the programs are not there at all — people will die for nothing. But, if the weapons have already been produced, the attack could prompt their use and, possibly, counterattack by the invading party, leading, conceivably, to the world's first two-sided nuclear war.

Although the invasion of Iraq was a debacle, the policy underlying it has survived. Curiously, that policy may have escaped discredit in part precisely because its target was a mirage. Is a military action a true test of a disarmament war's efficacy if the arms in question are missing?

Now another disarmament war — this time against Iran — is taking shape. Once again, the intelligence is at best fuzzy. There is much talk of "red lines" — some technical or other step that Iran might take to turn its nuclear fuel program into a nuclear-bomb program — that must not be crossed. But what are these red lines? Would research on an explosive lens suitable for detonating an atomic bomb be a red line? Would further dispersal of Iran's nuclear facilities be one? Would a report of a "decision" by someone in the Iranian government count?

In short, how can we be sure that a red line has been crossed? No one knows, and no one is saying. But it appears that a decision between war and peace will depend upon such obscure determinations.

The Iran crisis raises new issues as well. To achieve lasting disarmament, military action would also have to be lasting, beginning with regime change and continuing with a long occupation. But, while U.S. President Barack Obama has said of Iran that "all options are on the table," occupation clearly is not among them. The U.S. public has lost its appetite for occupying Middle Eastern countries, which means that only air power is available. But air power alone cannot impede Iran's nuclear program for more than a year or two.

What an air attack can do — and is likely to do — is goad Iran, which may or may not want to acquire nuclear arms, to launch a crash program to accomplish just that. Would other Middle Eastern countries not follow suit?

The aim of a disarmament war is to prevent proliferation, locally and regionally. Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is one route to proliferation. But a war to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear arms is probably a quicker and surer route to the same destination.

Fortunately, there may still be a way out of the impasse. Obama has called an Iranian atomic arsenal "unacceptable." Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has repeatedly stated that holding such arms is a sin, as well as "useless, harmful and dangerous." So the two leaders agree. In this, there may be the basis for a deal.

The bone of contention is uranium enrichment, which the P5+1 have so far insisted that Iran suspend, at least provisionally. Iran claims the right to enrich under the terms of the Nuclear

Non-Proliferation Treaty. The countries of the P5+1 reply that Iran lost that right by concealing nuclear programs from the International Atomic Energy Agency, which has declared Iran to be in noncompliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT. It has been suggested that the United States will demand dismantlement of an enrichment facility in the mountain stronghold of Fordow.

But the essence of a deal lies in permitting Iran to continue uranium enrichment for civilian purposes, in exchange for full disclosure of all programs, including any that were or are devoted to nuclear weapons research. To facilitate the process, Pierre Goldschmidt, a former International Atomic Energy Agency deputy director general, has proposed "a grace period during which Iran would not be penalized should it voluntarily disclose the existence of undeclared nuclear material and activities and/or acknowledge any past violations of the NPT or of its safeguards agreement."

When the cause of peace makes justice impossible, forgiveness is never easy. But, like South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission or the Catholic sacrament of confession, Goldschmidt's plan would prevent the perfect from becoming the enemy of the good.

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