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Iran's Quandary: Prosperity or Nuclear Breakout

By Bennett Ramberg

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When the U.S. and its allies resume talks over Iran's nuclear program on Nov. 7 to 8, the vexing task of crafting Iran's recent proposal into an enduring agreement will begin in earnest. There are many obstacles to an agreement, but among the least examined is the legacy of nuclear-disarmament efforts involving Libya and North Korea. Both cases raise issues that neither Iran nor the U.S. wants to see repeated but that both will have difficulty avoiding.

For the U.S., North Korea illustrates how a poor but ambitious country developed the bomb by gaming talks and gaining time. For Iran, former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's 2003 relinquishment of the country's weapons of mass destruction demonstrates how a regime, still considered a bete noire by the international community even after normalization of diplomatic relations, arguably forfeited its survival in 2011 by forgoing the chance to build a nuclear deterrent. Digging further into each case illuminates the challenges faced by Iran and its international interlocutors.

What makes the North Korea precedent particularly troubling is how much Iran has mimicked the regime in Pyongyang. This naturally prompts questions about whether Iran is using the current negotiations as a facade for an ongoing effort to develop nuclear weapons.

Consider parallels 10 years apart. In June 1993, following talks with the U.S. and a threat to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, North Korea allowed the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA, to conduct limited "safeguards activities." Then, in October 1994, the U.S. and North Korea entered into the Agreed Framework to freeze North Korea's nuclear program.

Similarly, in December 2003, after hiding construction of the Natanz uranium-enrichment facility and other plants from the IAEA, Iran agreed to sign — but not ratify — the so-called Additional Protocol, allowing broader application of IAEA safeguards. Then, in November 2004, in negotiations with European representatives, Iran agreed to suspend nuclear enrichment.

Neither agreement lasted long. In March 1996, the IAEA reported that North Korea was not complying with efforts to verify plutonium held at the Yongbyon nuclear facility. On Oct. 9, 2006, North Korea detonated its first nuclear weapon, and the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1718 calling on the country to abandon its program and rejoin international denuclearization talks. Since then, North Korea has responded to incremental tightening of international sanctions with two more nuclear tests, the latest this year under the new leadership of Kim Jong-un.

Likewise, in January 2006, following the collapse of negotiations with European emissaries, Iran broke the IAEA seals on the Natanz facility's equipment and storage areas. The following month, the IAEA reported the Islamic Republic to the Security Council for its failure to be forthright about its nuclear program. Since then, Iran has responded to incremental tightening of international sanctions by building more centrifuges. The question now is whether the North Korea-Iran parallel stops with Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani.

The Libyan legacy confronts Iran with its own conundrum. Like Iran, Gadhafi's Libya suffered economic and political isolation for many years during which it attempted to advance a program of weapons of mass destruction. By the late 1990s, however, it had had enough.

British and U.S. negotiators secretly met with Libyan counterparts to resolve the case of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, and other terrorism issues. In the quid pro quo that followed, Gadhafi agreed to eliminate his nascent nuclear program in exchange for an end to pariah status. This was coupled with a critical demand: no deal without a U.S. commitment to eschew regime change. On Dec. 19, 2003, Libya formally renounced all WMD efforts.

Eight years later, pinned down by a U.S. drone and French airstrikes, Gadhafi met his demise. Without a nuclear deterrent, his regime was helpless when the U.S. reneged on the deal, a lesson that has not been lost on North Korea.

Given this history, Iran has a strong incentive to retain at least a nuclear-breakout option, which would mean completing all but the final steps to weaponization. Of course, Iran's leaders may believe that economic isolation is the greatest danger to the regime. But what

happened in Libya has made them fear that Gadhafi's fate could be theirs, too, without an adequate deterrent.

But today, two years later, Iran must look again at where it is. As long as crippling economic sanctions remain in place, the government will be unable to have its yellowcake and eat it, too. Allowing Iran to retain some low-grade enrichment capacity would be a plausible concession — and one that would allow the country's leaders to save face — but only if linked to Iran's unfettered disclosure of all nuclear activities to the IAEA and confirmed cessation of any capability that contributes to weaponization. Given the stakes, any international agreement with Iran must come with an assured response to cheating, including military action.

With little leverage, Iran's leaders would then have two options. They could follow North Korea by sacrificing economic prosperity for nuclear breakout and hope that U.S. and Israeli talk of "all options" being on the table to stop their efforts is a bluff; or they could pursue economic prosperity by forgoing a nuclear-weapons capacity, and hope that a Libya-style revolt does not envelope the country and doom the regime to a fate like that of Gadhafi.

It is not an easy choice, but it is one that Iran's leaders cannot postpone for much longer.

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