

Stopping the Iran Bomb: It's time to go to the U.N. Security Council

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The United States and the key members of the International Atomic Energy Agency deserve high praise for demanding that Iran rectify its nuclear naughtiness. Together with the agency's February report to the U.N. Security Council on North Korea's violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the September 12 resolution calling Iran to account for its violation of that treaty constitutes the IAEA's toughest action since it was created nearly a half century ago.

But this is just a start. Now the Bush administration and the IAEA's board of governors must ready themselves to take two more actions: urge the Security Council to find Pyongyang and Tehran in breach of the Nonproliferation Treaty and get the council to block nuclear-related imports and exports to and from Iran and North Korea until they come back into full compliance with the spirit and the letter of the treaty.

Pushing these steps is sure to upset the diplomatic set, who have done their best to avoid such unpleasantness. For them, the whole point of engaging North Korea and Iran about their nuclear programs is to avoid going to the Security Council, which they would have us believe is simply too provocative. In fact, under the IAEA's charter, the U.N. Security Council is the authority the IAEA must report to whenever its nuclear safeguards have been violated. Blowing off an IAEA violations report by keeping the Security Council from taking action--something the world's diplomats have done with the IAEA's report on North Korea for the last six months--is tantamount to blowing off the Nonproliferation Treaty itself.

Why would the United States and the world's key powers knowingly toss the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty rulebook? For the very same reasons the Clinton administration cut a deal in 1994 with Pyongyang that delayed the application of treaty-required nuclear inspections in North Korea for more than a decade--to avoid diplomatic friction.

Despite IAEA director general Mohamed ElBaradei's repeated warnings that North Korea was engaged in "nuclear blackmail" and could not be trusted, the United States, Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan held off acting on the agency's North Korea violations report until they could engage Pyongyang in six-

way talks in Beijing on August 27-29. Other than Pyongyang's insisting that Washington give in to its demands for a nonaggression pact and threatening to test a nuclear device, though, these talks accomplished little.

All of this diplomatic dodging made IAEA officials in Vienna even more gun-shy about bringing the world's other nuclear proliferator--Iran--back in line. After a series of visits earlier this year, IAEA inspectors discovered Iran had imported significant quantities of uranium hexafluoride from China, converted uranium ore into uranium metal, and produced highly enriched uranium. All of these are steps on the way to making nuclear weapons. None is required of Iran to make nuclear electricity; none was disclosed as required to the IAEA. All of them put Iran in clear breach of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Rather than report these violations to the Security Council when it could have in June, though, and risk being ignored as it has been on North Korea, the IAEA held back. Instead, it called on Iran to freeze its efforts to enrich uranium, to open up all of its nuclear sites to IAEA inspectors, to clarify all of its nuclear activities, and to rectify its past safeguards infractions.

Iran's response was veiled contempt. Within weeks of the IAEA's request, Iran began work on a pilot uranium enrichment plant. Then it offered an incredibly lame excuse for the trace quantities of highly enriched uranium IAEA inspectors had found: These were not anything Iran had produced (in what Tehran had previously insisted was a totally indigenous uranium enrichment program) but rather residues from used, contaminated nuclear equipment it had imported from abroad. Finally, late in August, Tehran made preparations to open a much larger plant at Natanz to produce uranium bomb material. All of this helped last week to get the IAEA's board of governors at least to put a final deadline on Iran to come clean.

What's likely now? Iran might give in to one or more of the IAEA's September 12 demands. But the chances of its fully complying by November 1, when the IAEA board of governors reconvenes, are slim. As Iran's own representative to the IAEA, Ali Akbar Salehi, explained in late July, if America ever succeeds in "adding a legal dimension" to its pressure against Iran by finding it in violation, Washington will be in a position to "build an international consensus and push Iran into a corner."

Were Iran to admit to or be found in violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, its hopes of ever getting the Russians to complete or fuel the large power reactor they are working on at Bushehr would be in vain. As President Vladimir Putin pronounced in June, Russia must be certain Iran is not developing nuclear weapons before it completes the machine. This means Iran must give IAEA inspectors unhindered access and agree to send back to Russia whatever spent fuel the reactor generates. So far, Tehran has refused to do either. Yet, without this reactor, Iran would lose any peaceful justification for its uranium mining,

enrichment, fuel fabrication, and chemical plutonium separation programs. Continuing any of these efforts, then, would only further implicate Iran as a violator.

As for North Korea, the most popular diplomatic plan still seems to be to kick the can down the road. After refusing to negotiate further, Pyongyang reversed course in early September. A second round of six-way talks is slated for this fall. Meanwhile, South Korea has pleaded that nothing be done to suspend construction of the two U.S.-designed power reactors (each capable of making over 50 bombs worth of near weapons-grade plutonium during the first 15 months of operation) that Washington promised Pyongyang in 1994 in exchange for its eventually complying with the nonproliferation treaty. More important, no action has been taken on the IAEA's February violations report. North Korea formally withdrew from the treaty earlier this year but is still legally accountable for previously blocking the IAEA from inspecting its nuclear weapons material production-related sites.

Iran and North Korea, of course, want to postpone Security Council proceedings, and we have complied with their wishes (in North Korea's case, for over a decade). This must end. Rather than continue to delay applying the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty rules until some new deal might be cut, the United States and other treaty supporters should push now to enforce the rules. The game for our diplomats then would be the more productive one of figuring out how to get both regimes to come into full compliance with the treaty.

Toward this end, we should not just have the Security Council identify Pyongyang and Tehran as treaty violators, but get the council to call on all states to block nuclear-related imports and exports to and from these nations at least until both come back into full compliance with both the spirit and letter of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. This would require irreversible, verifiable dismantlement of these nations' nuclear programs, which were never intended for peaceful purposes in the first place.

Such a resolution would not just complement President Bush's own Proliferation Security Initiative, which is still being formulated, but show that the United States and other supporters of the NPT are finally serious about applying the rules that already exist.

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