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Bomb or Surrender: Not America's Only Options Regarding Iran

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A long-range strategy to counter the possible emergence of a nuclear Iran is in the national security interest of the United States. According to press reports,¹ the Obama Administration is working on such a “protect and defend” strategy. This plan should be a part of a convincing, practical, and effective approach for dissuading Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Some may criticize the decision to develop such a strategy, claiming it signals that the U.S. accepts Iran as a *de facto* nuclear weapons state. This is a legitimate concern. It is possible that the Obama Administration is accommodating Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions, but this does not have to be the case. Such planning could also become an important element of a strategy to demonstrate that America is prepared to defeat even a nuclear-armed Iran and thereby exert further pressure to dissuade Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

A Dangerous Message. If the United States only has an arms control strategy or a preventive military strike plan to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure before it obtains a weapon, it will send Iran a dangerous message: that nuclear weapons are the ultimate trump card against the U.S. It is better for the U.S. to remind Iran of the strategy that President Reagan used to counter a Soviet Union armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons—a strategy that defeated the Soviet Union.

This does not mean that Iran will behave in exactly the same way as the Soviet Union. But a “protect and defend” strategy based on missile

defenses combined with robust efforts to contain and deter Tehran could reduce the threat posed by a nuclear Iran.

A Broad Strategy. In order to uphold the non-proliferation regime, this protect and defend strategy must include offensive strike options, defensive systems—including ballistic missile defenses—and diplomatic initiatives. Specifically:

- **Modernize strike weapons.** The strike option requires both conventional and nuclear weapons that are capable of responding to any Iranian strategic attack.
- **Create a layered missile defense shield.** The missile defense shield must be a layered system, designed to counter every range of Iranian missiles in all stages of flight, including those that threaten the territory of the U.S. and its allies. This includes the element of the system that was to be constructed in Poland and the Czech Republic (known as the third site). The system was abandoned in favor of a policy to “reset” relations with Russia. If it is true that the Obama Administration is taking up this long-term protect-and-defend strategy toward Iran, it is all but admitting that the decision to cancel the third site

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was unwise. Long-range missile defense planning is an important part of America's ability to defend itself. Doing anything less than putting an effective missile shield in place would encourage Iran to redouble its effort to obtain nuclear weapons.

- ***Uphold the principle of non-proliferation.*** This means not recognizing Iran's "right" to nuclear technology even for peaceful purposes, because that right is conditioned on accepting and observing the standards of the nonproliferation regime. Clearly, Iran is not observing these standards. Upholding nonproliferation standards should not be confused with a policy for achieving nuclear disarmament: Nonproliferation is an immediate need, and a U.S. policy that pursues nuclear disarmament could exacerbate the proliferation problem. Further, a nuclear Iran will trigger a cascade of proliferation in the Middle East and elsewhere, putting President Obama's vision of global nuclear disarmament well out of reach.

Deterrence by Denial. The Obama Administration's strategy must convince Tehran that the U.S. is capable of responding effectively to neutralize the threat posed by a nuclear Iran. Furthermore, this strategy must make it clear that nuclear weapons will not give Iran *carte blanche* to intimidate its neighbors in the region or the U.S.

Besides a short-, medium-, and long-range ballistic missile defense strategy, this protect-and-defend strategy must include a possible preemptive ele-

ment as well as pressures such as sanctions and other nonproliferation efforts. Such policies will help convince Tehran that it will gain little from a nuclear capability and that any use of nuclear weapons would be disastrous for Iran.

Rather than sending the message that an Iranian nuclear capability will paralyze the U.S., such a long-term strategy sends the message that the U.S. and its allies are fully prepared to defend themselves and, if necessary, inflict severe damage on Iran.

Finding a Way Forward. The Obama Administration should develop a long-range strategy for protecting and defending the U.S. and its allies and establish a robust framework of augmented deterrence to mitigate the threat posed by a nuclear Iran. Strategic planning that assumes a nuclear-armed Iran, even if Iran does not have such weapons at this time, is necessary to develop policies that could help diminish Iran's appetite for nuclear weapons. Furthermore, such a strategy serves to protect and defend the United States and its allies from possible future threats as well.

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1. Robert Burns, "Analysis: U.S. Making Plans for Iran Nuke Strategy," Associated Press, October 28, 2009, at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gSJYokX4LaauEtC52J1Shfvl3HQD9BJN3F03> (November 2, 2009).