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Iran: Nuclear Weapons or Peaceful Energy?

By Robert Weiner

Iran: Nuclear Weapons or Peaceful Energy?

By Robert Weiner and James Lewis

With the ratification of START, a new nuclear alliance is shaping - one dedicated to the effort to prevent rogue nations from developing nuclear weapons.

Is Iran developing nuclear weapons or peaceful energy? The American intelligence and policy community from CIA Director Leon Panetta to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Defense Secretary Robert Gates - and past and present presidents Bush and Obama - all maintain Iran is developing an offensive nuclear weapons program. However, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claims the program is purely for nuclear energy development, and that's what he repeatedly tells the world and his own nation.

Recently, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and Vice-President, Ali Akbar Salehi announced that Iran achieved the necessary technology to produce yellowcake, a pre-enrichment form of uranium obtained from leaching solutions used on uranium ores, a required step in a homegrown weapons program.

November's Wikileaks document dump pointed out that Arab nations, Iran's supposed allies, are secretly calling for attacks against Iranian facilities to preempt nukes.

So if Ahmadinejad wants to avoid a US attack supported by his Arab colleagues, secretly or not, he has an even stronger reason to allow credible IAEA inspections. To the cables' outing, Secretary of State Clinton responded, "I think that it should not be a surprise that Iran is a source of great concern, not only in the U.S." The comments reported in the cables prove that Iran poses a serious threat in the eyes of its neighbors." After the intelligence misfire on Iraq WMD's, how can we independently know if Iran is a threat or not?

In other words, the key question is, *How do we know if Iran is developing weapons or energy?*

There is an established and credible way to differentiate peaceful power from weaponry. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Supplier Group of countries who export nuclear technology, reactor fuel is enriched, a process that increases the amount of reactive material up to 6% -- while weapons-grade is enriched 90%. The Iranians had difficulty enriching the materials at all until the Russians transferred to Iran heavy centrifuge technologies to enrich uranium possibly starting in 2008. We tried to stop the transfer but failed. These transfers are embargoed by UN sanctions; however, the centrifuges are now in Iran.

One indicator may be that Iran has failed to submit to IAEA inspections. There have been facilities uninspected for 18 years. Ahmadinejad continues to follow the path of Gaddafi pre-2003, when Libya left the dark side, no longer blocking inspections, and giving up its nuclear materials.

As Libya did, Iran is now developing advanced missile technologies with the assistance of North

Korea, according to public CIA and Air Force intelligence reports. The Iranian Shahab-3 missile has been fitted with elements of North Korea's Taep'o-Dong launch vehicle since July 2001. These advances and further cooperation have increased the range and accuracy of Iran's Shahab missile program capable of delivering nuclear warheads.

To the government of Iran, Libya "sold-out" and "kowtowed" in abandoning its nuclear program and became a Western puppet. However, Libya's GDP has quintupled since sanctions were eased. Libya has become a regional economic leader. It was removed from the State Department's Terrorist Sponsor List. Removal from the terror list means Libya's ports now are open to receiving American conventional weapons, as well as dual-use technology for water desalination and oil production to benefit the Libyan people.

Given that Iran borders a nuclear Pakistan, Iranian nuclear ambition seems likely. The conventional wisdom is that Iran is developing nuclear weapons to attack the US, Israel, or transfer the devices to extremist organizations. What is clear is that Iran is moving to balance its regional competitors and prevent US invasion. Any Iranian nuclear weapons development could trigger a nuclear arms race among jealous neighbors including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

During a May, 2010 speech, Ahmadinejad asked why Iran should be perceived as the bad guy: He asked why should the West and other countries should have "more than 20,000 nuclear warheads worldwide" and then blame Iran, which has "none." He spoke of America's waging war in Iraq despite no WMD's there, and our allowing torture--and asked "who" really is "the threat." He continued, "Regrettably, the government of the United States has not only used nuclear weapons, but continues to threaten to use such weapons against other countries, including Iran." Domestically, from his side, if we want to understand his position and argue successfully against it, we have to recognize the basis of his political point.

But Ahmadinejad also has some work on his side if he wants to prove he is not developing weapons. Iran must open all its nuclear facilities to IAEA. Otherwise, the same threats we made and implemented against Iraq for not allowing weapons testing - even though our assumptions turned out to be false concerning Iraq WMD's -- could become the basis of growing public opinion which will be used against Iran and Ahmadinejad. We assume, however, he likes his job and does not want to spend six months in a hole before his execution is posted on YouTube, right or wrong. Simply by allowing inspections, he now has a chance to avoid the possibility of such an outcome.

From December 13, 2010, interview by Russia Today (RT) TV with Robert Weiner, former white House spokesman:

During an interview with Russia Today, Robert Weiner highlighted the importance of START in preventing Iranian nuclear weapons. "When you have 20,000 nuclear weapons aimed all over the world, anybody can get at them, but that's just too darn many to be honest. How can we persuade Iran to go to zero when we have 20,000 and won't reduce them? That would be a ridiculous statement of immoral proportions, so we have got to take the proper steps."

COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT:

Transcript -" Robert Weiner on Russia Today TV (Live)

Topic: START Ratification

December 13, 2010 -" 22:07 -" 22:11 GMT

December 14, 2010 -" 1:07 -" 1:11 Moscow Time

Preserved Video Link: [click here](#)

Bill Dod - Good day to you - or should I say good morning from Moscow. So expectations are high that this is being -" what's being dubbed as President Obama's key foreign policy achievement could be just around the corner, what are your thoughts?

Robert Weiner - Well, I think it will happen. When you have people from Colin Powell to Henry Kissinger to Bill Clinton endorsing the START treaty, it is a no-brainer, and Prime Minister Putin is correct that it would be stupid for the Republicans to continue to block it. But then again, they want to block everything. I think they are boxed into a corner now because our national security is at stake. Not only dropping the 20,000 that are out there publicly -- the intelligence doesn't want to use a number but it's roughly 20,000 or even more that both countries have -- down to some more reasonable number, but the inspections, the inspections that are necessary so that rogue terrorists don't get at these nuclear weapons. That would be a disaster if you have terrorists that get at these weapons - so for all of these reasons, it's a must for the world's security to pass this treaty and I believe that Republicans will come around because they too want the security and safety of the world.

Dod - So why have they been dragging their heels, so far, what are their motives been? Are they up in arms against Russia or are they just trying to torpedo one of Obama's initiatives?

Weiner - In the past, Republicans used to work with Democrats. Now since Newt Gingrich, they've been wanting to kill everything, regardless. They have a killer instinct that I wish, perhaps, the Democrats would perhaps join some of - but we try to get some things done, unfortunately, and it cost us dearly in the election. The Republicans have learned that sound bites can win elections instead of good governing; something has to change. Just today, at the National Press Club, I hosted Steny Hoyer, the House Majority Leader, who said we have to get past two-year election cycles and think in terms of the good of the country. Something has to happen to help us to good governance, but good governance in the world, not just in the United States, includes passage of the START Treaty. I think perhaps by embarrassing the Republicans from stopping them from playing politics, which is dangerous, it's devastating, it could cause terrorism to succeed; they will come around and pass this treaty.

Dod - No matter how you look at this whole debacle (has) really highlighted, hasn't it, the shortcomings of the American political system. Can major issues like this really be hijacked to score points? It seems they can.

Weiner - Well, you love your country; I love mine. Even when we lose elections, I love our country and I love the fact that a majority of the American people can select a winner. So, I can't go with you on that one on the shortcomings of the political system as a whole. But in the near-term, the fact that we have a cloture system that allows a minority of Senators to block action has to be changed. It is not in our US Constitution, but that's what's happen hijacked. Republicans have hijacked the 60 vote rule instead of passing with 50.

Dod - Robert, you touched on it just now, but I want to expand on it please. The White House and many Congressman says a failure to ratify this treaty will endanger US national security,

Weiner - That's right!

Dod - What potential threats are we talking about here?

Weiner - We're talking about terrorists that could get at the nuclear weapons because we aren't doing sufficient inspections, on the security and safety of the facilities, that's the main thing. The other thing, is when you have 20,000 nuclear weapons aimed all over the world, anybody can get at them, but that's just too darn many to be honest. How can we persuade Iran to go to zero when we have 20,000 and won't reduce them? That would be a ridiculous statement of immoral proportions, so we have got to take the proper steps. Like, from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton on through, this has been bipartisan. To rid the world of nuclear weapons - and people called Reagan silly for having the dream, people said Obama was silly for having the dream, I think it's all of our dream. When I was in college, I organized a nuclear freeze rally that had 20,000 people at it at the University of Massachusetts, headed up by Senator Ted Kennedy. We have got to rid the world of the threat of nuclear annihilation and this treaty is a small step toward that wonderful goal.

Dod - Okay, live from Washington, Democratic strategist, Robert Weiner, thank you for your input.

TRANSCRIPT OF JAMES LEWIS ON RT-TV:

Transcript -" James Lewis on Russia Today TV

Topic: START Ratification

December 14, 2010 -" 3:07 -" 3:08 GMT

December 14, 2010 -" 6:07 -" 6:08 Moscow Time

Preserved Video Link: [click here](#)

Matt Trezza - Policy Analyst, James Lewis, says failure to ratify the deal will undermine global efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

James Lewis - If the treaty is not passed, the most dangerous ramification is that those safeguards will not continue and those inspections will continue to lapse between the United States and Russia -- and then beyond that, our policy between the United States and Russia is put at a very dangerous crossroads. We both have obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty to decrease our nuclear arsenals, moving toward a nuclear free world. The French have just disbanded their bomber fleet and the UK has moved solely to a submarine-launched system. The US and Russia still have all three kinds and it's still a very, very dangerous world.

My personal opinion is that, this a key element of legislation and I think the Republicans are simply backed into a corner. But when push-comes-to-shove, they are going to vote for it. The US-Russian cooperation of nuclear disarmament has a long history and a very productive history, and it's going to continue that way. I believe that Russia and the US, with Republican and Democratic leadership on the American side and the leadership of the Russian government, on the other side, will start to move toward a nuclear weapons-free world.

Robert Weiner is a former spokesman for the White House and the House Government Operations Committee; James Lewis is a senior policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates.

Author's Bio: Robert Weiner, NATIONAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND ISSUES STRATEGIST Bob Weiner, a national issues and public affairs strategist, has been spokesman for and directed the public affairs offices of White House Drug Czar and Four Star General Barry McCaffrey, the House Government Operations Committee and Chairman John Conyers (D-MI), Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY) and the House Narcotics Committee, and was Chief of Staff for the House Aging Committee and Chairman Claude Pepper (D-FL). He also was Legislative Assistant to Ed Koch of New York and a political aide to Ted Kennedy (D-MA) for his Presidential and Senate races. Bob worked at the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate as youth voter registration director in 1971-1972 when the constitution was amended to allow 18-year olds the vote. Since he left the White House in 2001, Bob heads up a public affairs and issue strategies company, Robert Weiner Associates. He is a regular political analyst on Radio America and has appeared on Bill Maher, CNN Crossfire, Today, Good Morning America, and the CBS, NBC, and ABC evening news. He is widely published in columns he writes on national issues in major papers throughout the country including recently the Washington Post, Denver Post, Miami Herald, Christian Science Monitor, New York Daily News, Baltimore Sun, Boston Globe, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Atlanta Constitution, New York Post, Washington Times, Sacramento Bee, Palm Beach Post, Salt Lake Tribune, Minneapolis Star Tribune, and Adweek. He is also regularly quoted in key media coast-to-coast, including the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, AP and Reuters, concerning the presidential campaign and national issues.

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