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Points East and West: Ticking Time Bomb

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How soon will Iran get a nuclear bomb? And what should the West do to prevent this scenario?

Before the US National Intelligence Agency published, in December 2007, its findings on Tehran's nuclear programme (NIE), few doubted that the Bush administration would eventually attack Iran's facilities. After all, several senior officials in the administration had explicitly repeated that "no option was off the table". Although they were sceptical of the diplomatic effort led by France, Germany and Britain to negotiate a deal with Tehran, they had given their support to a set of measures offered to Iran in June 2006 by the international community in exchange for a deal, only to see it rebuffed. An International Atomic Energy Agency report published in late November 2007 was extremely negative, so it was safe to assume that a showdown with the US was looming.

The American report was a game changer. It declared that Tehran had "halted its nuclear weapons programme" in autumn 2003. It suggested that Iran had suspended its military programme "primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work."

There were many caveats to this judgment, buried in the footnotes and intervening text, but the headline was that Iran no longer pursued nuclear weapons. The report undermined any residual credibility to the threat of US military action. Diplomacy was the only option left. George W. Bush endorsed it — and a new proposal was delivered to Iran with the signature of the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, in June 2008. President Obama picked up where Bush left off, and made engagement with Iran a centrepiece of his new foreign policy. Then, recently, Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered a nuclear umbrella to US allies in the region, as if to suggest that the US was now resigned to a nuclear Iran.

Two years have gone by and diplomacy has achieved nothing. Meanwhile, Iran's regime has quelled a reformist attempt to retake the presidency by rigging an election and brutally repressing the ensuing protests. After all this, does diplomacy still have a

chance? And given Iran's record, can the US resign itself to an Islamic Republic with nuclear weapons?

Much of the answer depends on Iran's decision to suspend its weapons programme in 2003. The NIE was dissected by pundits and politicians alike. But no one in the ensuing acrimonious debate seemed to notice a crucial question that had not been asked: how advanced was the programme when Iran supposedly halted it? It seems an important question and one that the intelligence community should have answered.

The answer came recently, in two separate reports that were leaked to the press. Last March, a German intelligence report was submitted to Germany's Constitutional Court to back the conviction of a German-Iranian businessman accused of supplying Iran with technology for its nuclear programme. The defence had cited the NIE to suggest that the transaction, which occurred in 2007, could not have been used to supply Iran's military programme, given that the latter had been halted four years before. The court upheld the conviction based on the intelligence, which contradicted the NIE — the weapons programme, the German spies said, had never been suspended. A more recent report, published in July in *The Times*, cited Western intelligence sources as suggesting that Iran had indeed halted its weapons programme in 2003 but only because by then it had been successfully completed.

If the report is accurate, it answers the question the NIE did not address. Iran stopped its nuclear weaponisation programme in 2003 because its strides had far outpaced the enrichment programme. The decision to suspend had nothing to do with the invasion of Iraq or with the much-vaunted secret negotiations between the US and Iran that were ongoing in Paris at the time. It mattered little that IAEA inspectors had started snooping around the recently exposed nuclear installations. Rather, Iran had finished the weaponisation part of the programme before it had completed perfecting a delivery system and mastering the enrichment process.

Iran's decisions have never been influenced by offers and incentives. The only thing that has ever mattered to Tehran was time. The only reason Iran might still be willing to negotiate is again time: if it still needs time to complete its goal of nuclear weapons capability. US engagement will not change this. Iran can build a bomb, has been busy building one and has never even considered changing its mind.