

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Case Study in Successful U.S.-Japan Alliance Management

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Speaking at Suntory Hall in Tokyo during his inaugural visit to the Asia-Pacific region as President of the United States, Barack Obama in November 2009 affirmed his Administration's commitment to "an enduring and revitalized alliance between the United States and Japan." Noting the impending 60th anniversary of the alliance, President Obama pledged to "deepen" the ties between Washington and Tokyo as a cornerstone of a broader strategy of reengagement with the region. At the same time, Obama cast the U.S.-Japan alliance in global terms, noting Japan's "important contributions to stability around the world—from reconstruction to Iraq, to combating piracy off the Horn of Africa, to assistance for the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan."¹

Over the next two-plus years, one of the preeminent tests to confront the U.S.-Japan alliance would emerge not from its traditional sphere of geographic responsibility, in the Asia-Pacific, but from further afield in the Middle East. The dynamic security challenges in the Western Pacific would largely serve to push the United States and Japan towards closer cooperation during this period²—in particular, a newfound diplomatic and military "assertiveness" by China, on the one hand, and a series of provocative and hostile acts by North Korea, including the March 2010 sinking of the ROKS Cheonan, on the other. However, it was Iran's nuclear program—and the associated U.S. and multilateral sanctions it inspired—which most threatened to bring U.S. and Japanese interests into collision.

Despite the high potential for conflict and tension over Iran, alliance leaders in both capitals have, thus far, navigated this challenge remarkably successfully. This short paper will examine how and why they have been able to do so, briefly exploring the history of Japan's role in the Iranian nuclear confrontation, and then offering lessons learned

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and recommendations—based on the author's travel to Japan and meetings with Japanese and U.S. officials—about how to consolidate and expand U.S.-Japanese cooperation on this issue.

The Iranian Challenge

The origins of the Iranian nuclear program date to the late 1980s, when the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran began a covert, illicit, and multifaceted effort to acquire the core components of a nuclear weapons program, including centrifuge technologies, secretly purchased through the Pakistan-based AQ Khan network.³ It was not until 2002, however, that Iran's nuclear activities aroused significant international attention, triggered by the disclosure of two previously-covert Iranian nuclear facilities by an Iranian dissident group: a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy water production plant at Arak.⁴ The exposure of these facilities initiated a decade-long diplomatic engagement with Iran, initially spearheaded by the so-called E-3—the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—and subsequently expanded to be led by the P-5+1: the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany.

In September 2009, another covert Iranian enrichment facility was exposed to the world.⁵

Located approximately 20 miles northeast of Qom, the Fordow facility has several suspicion-provoking features. First, it is buried deep underground, making it harder to detect and less vulnerable to airstrikes. Second, the small size of the facility makes it ill-suited for the industrial-scale manufacturing of nuclear fuel needed for a civilian nuclear power program, but effective for the production of the small batches of highly enriched uranium necessary for a nuclear weapon.⁶

In addition to the proliferation concerns sparked by Iran's ongoing enrichment activities, there are also unresolved questions about possible military dimensions of the Iranian nuclear program. These questions, outlined at length in a 8 November 2011 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),⁷ revolve around Iran's apparent efforts in the past to acquire the knowledge required to weaponize highly enriched uranium. Of particular interest to Iran are the capabilities to trigger a nuclear detonation and to miniaturize a nuclear warhead so that it could be placed atop a ballistic missile. Iran has repeatedly refused to allow the IAEA access to facilities believed to be tied to this weaponization work.⁸

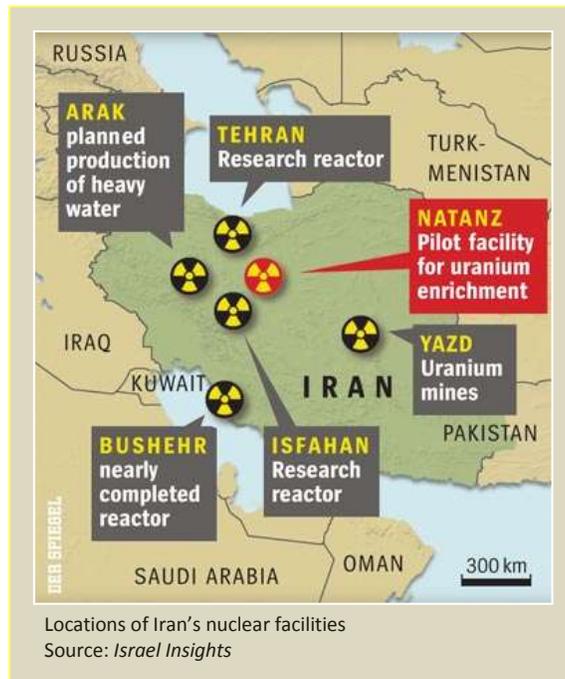
In response to Iran's failure to cooperate with the IAEA, its Board of Governors voted in 2006 for the first time to find Tehran in non-compliance with its Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) obligations. Subsequently, the Board referred its case to the UN Security Council,⁹ which has subsequently imposed four rounds of sanctions against Iran—the most recent of which

was adopted in the spring of 2010.¹⁰ At the same time, the United States has imposed its own separate unilateral sanctions against Iran. Since the mid-1990s, these U.S. sanctions have been extraterritorial: rather than target Iran directly, U.S. sanctions have instead prescribed penalties on third parties in foreign countries that conduct specific activities in or with Iran.¹¹

Despite ten years of off-and-on negotiations, Iran's nuclear program today continues to move forward. In 2006, Iran initiated indigenous enrichment of uranium at Natanz to 5 percent, amassing a growing stockpile of fissile material that Tehran claims will eventually be used to fuel civilian nuclear reactors.¹² In 2010, it began enriching uranium to 19.75 percent at Natanz, ostensibly for use in a medical research reactor.¹³ Then, in late 2011, Iran began enriching to 19.75 percent at the hardened site at

Fordow.¹⁴ According to the most recent report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran likely now possesses at least 5,400 kilograms of uranium enriched to 5 percent and 95 kilograms enriched to 20 percent.¹⁵ At the same time, Iran is attempting to increase the number and sophistication of its centrifuges, which would allow it to process greater quantities of fissile material faster.¹⁶

Iran, however, is not making a beeline "dash" to build a bomb. Rather, it appears that Tehran is pursuing a far more sophisticated strategy—hardening, duplicating, and dispersing the key elements of a nuclear weapons production



capability. This ensures that Iran is increasingly invulnerable to the kind of knockout airstrike that the Israelis successfully launched against the Iraqi reactor at Osiraq in 1981 and against a secret Syrian nuclear site in 2007.¹⁷ Consequently, this sophisticated strategy will put Iran's leaders in a position at some point in the future— if or when they decide to weaponize—to rapidly field not just a single weapon, but an atomic arsenal.



Satellite image of Fordow nuclear facility near Qom, Iran
Source: GeoEye

Iran's strategy has provoked growing alarm both in neighboring Arab countries and in Israel, which view the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat.¹⁸ Israeli officials, in particular, have increasingly insisted on the need to stop Iran's nuclear program before it enters into a "zone of immunity," as Defense Minister Ehud Barak has called it.¹⁹ The Iranian decision in late 2011 to begin moving enrichment activities into the Fordow site—which is believed to be sufficiently hardened that it is largely impervious to Israeli conventional airstrike—sharply ratcheted up these fears and occasioned growing public and private warnings by the Israelis that they might soon launch a military attack against Iran.²⁰

The Japanese Relationship with Iran

The historic bedrock of the Iran-Japan relationship has been Tokyo's need to secure reliable energy supplies. Japan has few domestic energy resources and consequently must rely overwhelmingly on oil and gas imports to power its economy; it is the third largest consumer of oil in the world behind the United States and China, and the third-largest net importer of crude oil.²¹

Japan's dependence on oil imports was exacerbated by the 11 March 2011 "triple disaster," in which a 9.0 earthquake struck off the coast of Sendai, Japan, triggering a tsunami that resulted in over 15,000 confirmed deaths. The tsunami also crippled the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, setting off a chain of equipment failures that led to the most serious uncontrolled release of radioactive materials since Chernobyl.²² According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, the earthquake and ensuing damage instantly resulted in a shutdown of 6,800 megawatts of electric generating capacity. In the aftermath of the disaster and public horror at the Fukushima Daiichi accident, Japanese authorities began safety inspections of all of the country's commercial nuclear power plants; as of March 2012, just one of the 54 reactors was online.²³ In addition, Japan's leaders pledged a gradual phase-out over the next 40 years of their reliance on nuclear energy—responsible for approximately 30 percent of Japan's energy consumption prior to the triple disaster. The decommissioning of nuclear power plants coupled with a nuclear phase-out will further increase Tokyo's dependence on fossil fuel imports, at the cost of tens of billions of dollars a year.²⁴

For decades, Iran—with the fourth largest proven oil reserves in the world—has provided Japan with a significant share of its crude oil needs, historically second or third after Saudi Arabia and the United

Arab Emirates.²⁵ As of 2003, Japan imported 683,000 barrels per day from Iran.²⁶ Indeed, trade between Japan and Iran is dominated by oil, and the total value of trade has largely fluctuated with global crude prices. As of 2007, for instance, according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 96 percent of the value of Iranian imports to Japan was attributable to oil, with an additional 3 percent attributable to liquefied petroleum gas, for a total of approximately \$12 billion. Japanese exports to Iran were by comparison quite modest: approximately \$1.3 billion attributed to sales of general machinery, motor vehicles, and iron and steel.²⁷

In addition to its direct purchases of Iranian oil, Japan also invested in Iran's energy infrastructure. In 2004, most notably, a consortium of Japan's INPEX and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) signed an agreement for the development of the southern portion of the Azadegan field, in which INPEX took a 75 percent share.²⁸

Navigating Sanctions: A Delicate Dance

The collision of U.S. extraterritorial sanctions and Japan's energy security interests has long represented a potential rupture point in the U.S.-Japan alliance. Despite this risk, however, the two countries have successfully managed this tension, notably over the last three years, as the U.S. pressure campaign against Tehran has escalated.

First, Japan has gradually withdrawn from its investments in the Iranian energy sector, which were sanctionable under the 1996 Iran Libya Sanctions Act.²⁹ In 1996, the year that Iran announced its decision to begin uranium enrichment, INPEX agreed to reduce its stake in the South Azadegan Field from 75 percent to 10 percent. In October 2010, after the passage in Congress of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions,

Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), it pulled out of the project completely.³⁰

At the same time, Japan has also moved to establish a sanctions regime against Iran that is roughly similar to that of the other industrialized democracies. In 2010, for instance, after the United States Congress passed CISADA, the European Union, Canada, and Australia followed suit with their own packages of Iran sanctions. Japan came next, announcing that it would suspend all new oil and gas investments in Iran as well as impose sanctions on a set of Iranian banks designated by either the United Nations or the U.S. Treasury Department for their role in financing proliferation-related activities.³¹

An even greater challenge lay ahead, however, as pressure began to build in late 2011 for an outright oil embargo against Iran, as well as the imposition of U.S. extraterritorial sanctions against the Central Bank of Iran, the conduit through which Tokyo has paid for its crude purchases. Here, too, however, a similar sequence of behavior emerged.

First, in late December 2011, the United States Congress passed legislation that imposed sanctions on foreign financial entities doing business with the Central Bank of Iran. The legislation contained a narrowly-tailored escape clause from the sanctions, however, for countries that "significantly" reduce their oil imports from Iran.³² Soon thereafter, in early 2012, the European Union adopted a ban on Iranian oil imports, which would come into effect in June.³³

Japanese officials initially expressed considerable unease about the new U.S. sanctions in early 2012.³⁴ By early spring, however, after close consultations with U.S. officials and other global oil producers, Tokyo began to express cautious confidence that it would be able to secure an

exemption from U.S. sanctions by virtue of having “significantly” reduced its oil imports from Iran.³⁵ This confidence proved warranted. In March, the Obama Administration announced that it would exempt Japan, allowing it to continue purchasing limited amounts of oil through the Central Bank of Iran, without fear of censure.³⁶ As of April 2012, Tokyo had slashed crude purchases from Iran by almost 80 percent compared to the first two months of the year—a reduction of approximately 250,000 barrels per day. This has been the steepest reduction of any of the Asia-Pacific consumers of Iranian oil.³⁷

In truth, Japan’s reduction in Iranian oil imports in 2012, while dramatic, was preceded in previous years by a gradual weaning away from Tehran. In fact, Japan’s crude imports from the Islamic Republic have dropped by 40 percent in the past five years.³⁸ Even before the new U.S. sanctions came into effect, for instance, Japan’s crude imports from Iran had declined to 313,000 barrels per day as of 2011—in comparison to more than twice that amount a decade ago.³⁹

What Went Right?

Based on a visit to Japan in August 2011, organized by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and Project 2049 Institute, in addition to subsequent discussions with Japanese officials and analysts by the author, several conclusions can be drawn about why and how U.S. policymakers have been able to persuade their counterparts in Tokyo to desist from problematic or sanctionable activities with respect to Iran over the last three to five years, as well as what the most effective strategies for continued successful U.S.-Japan engagement will be, going forward:

■ *Managing Japanese energy interests*

Japan lacks any deep-rooted strategic, ideological, or cultural ties to anchor its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rather, as noted above, relations with Tehran are driven overwhelmingly by the economic necessity, foremost Tokyo’s fossil fuel requirements. U.S. strategy under the Obama Administration has recognized this reality, and consequently sought to persuade other global oil producers—most notably Saudi Arabia—to increase their crude production and provide assurances to Tokyo that any reductions in Iranian imports by Japan will be compensated.⁴⁰

In addition, Japanese authorities have likely heard direct Israeli warnings that, in the absence of escalating global pressure against Tehran, they will be forced to consider their own unilateral military



By April 2012, Japan’s crude imports from Iran decreased by 250,000 barrels per day relative to imports in January and February.
Source: *Al Arabiya News*

actions.⁴¹ Faced with such a prospect, and the significant likelihood that such an attack will result in a spike in global oil prices at least temporarily and the disruption of all energy shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, Japan’s leaders have likely accepted that participation in a more robust global sanctions regime is the lesser of two evils.

■ *Iran as a test of the U.S.-Japan alliance*

Over the last two years, U.S. officials have consistently placed participation in Iran sanctions at the top of the bilateral U.S. alliance agenda with Tokyo, including engagements at the highest levels of government. By doing so, Washington has fostered the impression that Japan's handling of Iran will shape perceptions in Washington of the alliance itself. They have also unequivocally conveyed that Japanese activities, which are in violation of U.S. sanctions, will in fact be subject to sanction.

In this respect, the overwhelming bipartisan votes in Congress in support of Iran sanctions—99-0 in the United States Senate, in the case of CISADA in June 2010⁴²; 100-0 in the Senate, in the case of the Central Bank of Iran sanctions adopted in late 2011⁴³—have underscored to Japanese interlocutors the importance of Iran to the broader body politic in the United States, as well as the Administration's increasingly limited room for political maneuver on this issue, and the potentially high, second-order consequences for Japan of being declared in violation of U.S. sanctions.

■ *Iran sanctions as a global norm*

A third factor that potentially explains the receptivity of the Government of Japan to scaling back its economic and energy ties with Iran is that, by doing so, Japan is keeping pace with an evolving global norm among the advanced industrialized democracies. Rather than making Iran sanctions merely a bilateral U.S.-Japan issue, the decision of the European Union countries, along with Switzerland, Australia, Canada, and South Korea, to adopt similar measures against Iran since 2010 has recast the question for Tokyo: namely, does Japan want to be inside, or outside, this international consensus?

Put another way, the choice for Japan with respect to Iran sanctions has been whether to stand with its historic partners and allies in the West, or with Russia, China, and India? Cast in this light, Japan's willingness to accept and embrace unpalatable reductions in its energy investments and oil purchases from Iran makes much greater sense.

■ *Iran as a threat to the global nonproliferation regime and Asia-Pacific security*

From a Japanese standpoint, it has also been helpful that the United States has increasingly been able to frame the problem of Iran's nuclear activities as a challenge to the global nonproliferation regime, rather than in the narrower context of the longstanding hostile relationship between Washington and Tehran. Given Japan's historic and deeply emotional investment in the cause of nonproliferation, Iran's noncompliance with its obligations under the NPT—as rigorously documented by the IAEA, under the current leadership of a Japanese national no less—correctly underscores that persuading Iran's leadership to end its illicit activities is not just as a matter of regional stability, but of international law and global security.

Moreover, the Obama Administration has argued—and neighboring Arab governments have quietly echoed⁴⁴—that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, if unchecked, will compel others in the region to develop their own atomic arsenals, threatening the sustainability of the NPT regime itself.⁴⁵ A nuclear-armed Iran thus could spark a cascade of proliferation, resulting in a Middle East in which multiple states with weak institutions, domestic instability, and strategic traditions of both military brinkmanship and proxy warfare, are armed with nuclear weapons. Due to the relatively short distances in the Gulf region, moreover, these

weapons would need to be on perennial hair trigger alert. The prospect of a nuclear exchange in such an environment would be high.

In addition to stressing global nonproliferation interests in stopping Iran's illicit activities, U.S. public and private engagement with Japan should also consider drawing out and elaborating to a greater extent upon the close strategic ties between Iranian and North Korean weapon of mass destruction programs, including cooperation between Pyongyang and Tehran in the development of ballistic missile technology that directly threatens Japan.⁴⁶ Rather than treating the two rogue regimes as discrete and disconnected threats, the progress of the two proliferators should be framed as mutually reinforcing, in order to help persuade Japanese officials and public opinion to recognize their own direct national security stake in the outcome of the Iranian nuclear dispute. Japanese actions against Iran should thus be framed as rooted in Japanese self-interest in its own backyard as well.

Conclusions

The success thus far of the United States and Japan in managing the tensions and competing interests raised by the Iranian nuclear program is reason for optimism about the resiliency of the U.S.-Japan alliance. However, this progress should not be taken for granted. In particular, sustaining U.S.-Japanese solidarity over Iran in the months ahead will require

continued attention and energy from both Washington and Tokyo.

Of particular note, the Government of Japan and Japanese public opinion are likely to be unsettled if neighboring countries—such as South Korea and China—are perceived by Tokyo as preserving robust commercial ties to Iran, while nonetheless avoiding U.S. sanctions. In this respect, it is important for U.S. policy not to be perceived as adopting a “double standard” with respect to the major economies of the Western Pacific.

In addition, while the exemption granted by the Obama Administration to Japan will allow it to continue to purchase limited amounts of crude from Tehran and pay for it through the Central Bank of Iran without running afoul of U.S. sanctions, new EU sanctions on maritime insurance and reinsurance will make these shipments increasingly challenging for Japan. A creative approach consequently may be necessary to ensure that Tokyo is not completely deprived of the ability to purchase small quantities of Iranian crude, at least in the short term.

Despite these and other potential challenges ahead, the handling of Iran represents a quiet, but important, success story for the U.S.-Japan alliance—and a reminder of its importance as a mechanism for contending with security challenges not just in the Asia-Pacific region, but globally.

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