March Reflections, 2016 Vol 38 No 7

On July 14, 2015, the United States, along with China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and Germany signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran which began a process of gradual implementation. In broad terms, the plan calls for Iran to eliminate its stockpile of medium enriched uranium and about two-thirds of its centrifuges, necessary for producing nuclear weapons, for at least 15 years. In turn, the international community will gradually lift economic sanctions against Iran.

In the United States the agreement has run into strong opposition. Although Congressional efforts to block it failed, the Republican candidates for president have continued to oppose it, while promising various efforts to repeal it. Since the Democratic candidates support the agreement, we can expect a vigorous debate on the issue through most of the 2016 election year.

In 1970, some 190 nations signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has three main components: non-nuclear states agree not to acquire nuclear weapons; the nuclear nations (USA, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China) agree to share the fruits of nuclear technology with other countries; and those five states agree to pursue disarmament, aimed at the elimination of nuclear weapons. Iran signed the treaty but India, Israel, Pakistan, and South Sudan did not. North Korea signed but withdrew in 2009. Four other states have nuclear weapons: Pakistan, North Korea, Israel and India. The agreement is reviewed every five years. In 1995 it was extended indefinitely, but in 2015, the members could not agree on a final report, indicating current disturbing trends.

Currently, all the nuclear nations are spending large amounts to upgrade their nuclear arsenal: for example, China is investing in submarines and in mobile missile systems; the United States is in the process of upgrading our whole nuclear arsenal at an estimated cost of $348 billion over the next ten years; the Soviet Union is investing about one third of its defense budget in increasing its nuclear capability. To balance this distressing analysis we should remember that since the height of the Cold War, the United States and Russia have significantly reduced their nuclear arsenals by as much as 85%, according to some estimates.

It is hard to justify the current buildup on either moral or pragmatic grounds. Such large expenditures on nuclear weapons limit our ability to care for people in need; for example, our veterans, our poor, our unemployed, our uninsured, and our mentally ill. Furthermore, our vast nuclear arsenal is strategically limited. It did not stop the Russians from annexing Crimea or North Korea from expanding its police state, or ISIS from carrying out terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, the 1990 NPT was an historic breakthrough, which merits further efforts to avoid the dangerous proliferation of nuclear weapons.

This brief survey provides a background for discussion of the Iran Nuclear Agreement. We have common agreement that the international community is better off if Iran does not have nuclear weapons. The question that will be debated during the presidential campaign is whether the current agreement should be kept in place by the next administration or unilaterally abrogated, as has been advocated by some opponents.

The Obama administration makes the case that the Nuclear Agreement blocks Iran’s four possible pathways to a nuclear weapon. To produce a uranium bomb they need tens of thousands of centrifuges to produce enough highly enriched uranium. They currently have enough uranium to construct eight to ten bombs, but the agreement requires them to reduce this stockpile by 98%. Right now Iran has nearly 20,000 centrifuges but they must reduce this number to 6,104 for the next ten years. The agreement also blocks Iran from producing any weapons-grade plutonium in the future and requires them to ship out of the country the spent fuel rods from their heavy water reactor that could be used in a weapons program. Moreover, Iran has agreed to robust monitoring, verification and inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), including access to any suspicious sites.

Without the deal, according to the administration, Iran could use their current stockpiles to produce eight to ten bombs in two or three months. If they decide to break the agreement, it would take a year or more to produce one nuclear bomb and they would again incur the economic sanctions that helped produce the deal the in the first place.

The 159 page Joint Comprehension Plan has gained the support from some influential religious leaders. In his address to the United Nations, Pope Francis declared: “The recent agreement reached on the nuclear question in a sensitive region of Asia and the Middle East is proof of the potential of political good will and of law, exercised with sincerity**,** patience and consistency.” The Pope sees the deal as an example of international cooperation based on the rule of law which will help avoid war and prevent further nuclear proliferation. Francis expressed his personal hope “that this agreement will be lasting and efficacious and bring forth the desired fruits with the cooperation of all the parties involved.”

In accord with the papal position, Bishop Oscar Cantu, representing the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, sent a letter to Congressional leaders urging them to support the Iran agreement, describing it as “important in advancing a peaceful resolution of the serious questions that have been raised regarding Iran’s nuclear program. “ Bishop Cantu added: “The alternative to an agreement leads towards armed conflict or outcomes of profound concern to the Church.” He concluded his letter: “We urge Congress to support these efforts” to build bridges that foster peace and greater understanding. During the Congressional debate on the agreement, 50 Christian leaders representing the major denominations, urged Congress to support the agreement as did over 60 Jewish rabbis. It also gained the support of five former Secretaries of State, including Colin Powell, who called some of the agreed provisions “remarkable” and praised “the very vigorous verification regimen” that Iran accepted.

In the United States, the main opposition to the plan has come from the Republican majorities in Congress. Opponents have proposed various arguments against it: we negotiated not out of strength but out of weakness and ended up with a bad deal; after ten years Iran will be able to produce a bomb; the verification regimen is not strict enough and allows Iran to cheat; they are getting billions of dollars which they will use to export terrorism; the deal will encourage other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, to pursue a nuclear capability; it puts Israel at greater risk; it creates greater instability in the Middle East and makes the world less safe.

The Republican leadership has expressed its opposition to the agreement in various ways. On March 9, 2015, 47 Republican senators sent an open letter to the Leaders of Iran reminding them that Congress must approve any agreement and that a new president could easily revoke it. Without consulting the White House, Speaker John Boehner invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address a joint session of Congress on March 3, 2015, providing him with a forum to make his case against the agreement. In his speech, the prime minister argued that the proposed deal leaves Iran with “a vast nuclear infrastructure” that could be quickly activated if Iran cheats on the agreement. Furthermore, even if Iran complies, after ten years, they will be free to produce a nuclear arsenal with no sanctions to restrain them. In the meantime, Iran will have more funds to support terrorism and there is a good chance that its ambitions will fuel a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

All the leading candidates for president have stated their positon on the Iranian nuclear agreement. Donald Trump, who called it “one of the great dumb deals of our time,” said it probably is not feasible to just get rid of it, but he would “police that contract so tough that they don’t have a chance.” Senator Ted Cruz called the deal “the single gravest national security threat facing America“ and its implementation will make the Obama Administration “the leading global financier of radical Islamic terrorism in the world.” Keeping open the military option, he has made it clear that a Cruz presidency would mean the end of the deal. Senator Marco Rubio will throw out the agreement because it does not stop their uranium enrichment, their ballistic missile program or their sponsorship of terrorism. On the other hand, former secretary of state Hilary Clinton supports the agreement “with vigorous enforcement, unyielding verification, and swift consequences for any violations.” She and others have argued that a unilateral withdrawal by the United States would leave us isolated from our allies and make it impossible to reimpose effective sanctions on Iran.

The presidential campaign will provide opportunities for a substantive debate on the merits of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and whether it should be kept in place or abrogated, and if so, what alternate strategy would take its place.