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Gates Says U.S. Lacks Strategy to Curb Iran's Nuclear Drive

By DAVID E. SANGER and THOM SHANKER  
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WASHINGTON - Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has warned in a secret three-page memorandum to top White House officials that the United States does not have an effective long-range policy for dealing with Iran's steady progress toward nuclear capability, according to government officials familiar with the document.

Several officials said the highly classified analysis, written in January to President Obama's national security adviser, Gen. James L. Jones, touched off an intense effort inside the Pentagon, the White House and the intelligence agencies to develop new options for Mr. Obama. They include a revised set of military alternatives, still under development, to be considered should diplomacy and sanctions fail to force Iran to change course.

Officials familiar with the memo's contents would describe only portions dealing with strategy and policy, and not sections that apparently dealt with secret operations against Iran, or how to deal with Persian Gulf allies.

One senior official, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the memo, described the document as "a wake-up call." But White House officials dispute that view, insisting that for 15 months they had been conducting detailed planning for many possible outcomes regarding Iran's nuclear program.

In an interview on Friday, General Jones declined to speak about the memorandum. But he said: "On Iran, we are doing what we said we were going to do. The fact that we don't announce publicly our entire strategy for the world to see doesn't mean we don't have a strategy that anticipates the full range of contingencies - we do."

But in his memo, Mr. Gates wrote of a variety of concerns, including the absence of an effective strategy should Iran choose the course that many government and outside analysts consider likely: Iran could assemble all the major parts it needs for a nuclear weapon - fuel, designs and detonators - but stop just short of assembling a fully operational weapon.

In that case, Iran could remain a signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty while becoming what strategists call a "virtual" nuclear weapons state.

According to several officials, the memorandum also calls for new thinking about how the United States might contain Iran's power if it decided to produce a weapon, and how to deal with the possibility that fuel or weapons could be obtained by one of the terrorist groups Iran has supported, which officials said they considered to be a less-likely possibility.

Mr. Gates has never mentioned the memo in public. His spokesman, Geoff Morrell, declined comment on specifics in the document, but issued a statement on Saturday saying, "The secretary believes the president and his national security team have spent an extraordinary amount of time and effort considering and preparing for the full range of contingencies with respect to Iran."

Pressed on the administration's ambiguous phrases until now about how close the United States was willing to allow Iran's program to proceed, a senior administration official described last week in somewhat clearer terms that there was a line Iran would not be permitted to cross.

The official said that the United States would ensure that Iran would not "acquire a nuclear capability," a step Tehran could get to well before it developed a sophisticated weapon. "That includes the ability to have a breakout," he said, using the term nuclear specialists apply to a country that suddenly renounces the nonproliferation treaty and uses its technology to build a small arsenal.

Nearly two weeks ago, Mr. Obama, in an interview with The New York Times, was asked about whether he saw a difference between a nuclear-capable Iran and one that had a fully developed weapon. "I'm not going to parse that right now," he said. But he noted that North Korea was considered a nuclear-capable state until it threw out inspectors and, as he said, "became a self-professed nuclear state."

Mr. Gates has alluded to his concern that intelligence agencies might miss signals that Iran was taking the final steps toward producing a weapon. Last Sunday on the NBC News program "Meet the Press," he said: "If their policy is to go to the threshold but not assemble a nuclear weapon, how do you tell that they have not assembled? I don't actually know how you would verify that." But he cautioned that Iran had run into production difficulties, and he said, "It's going slow - slower than they anticipated, but they are moving in that direction."

Mr. Gates has taken a crucial role in formulating the administration's strategy, and he has been known over his career to issue stark warnings against the possibility of strategic surprise.

Some officials said his memo should be viewed in that light: as a warning to a relatively new president that the United States was not adequately prepared.

He wrote the memo after Iran had let pass a 2009 deadline set by Mr. Obama to respond to his offers of diplomatic engagement.

Both that process and efforts to bring new sanctions against Iran have struggled. Administration officials had hoped that the revelation by Mr. Obama in September that Iran was building a new uranium enrichment plant inside a mountain near Qum would galvanize other nations against Iran, but the reaction was muted. The next three months were spent in what proved to be fruitless diplomatic talks with Iran over a plan to swap much of its low-enriched uranium for fuel for a medical reactor in Tehran. By the time Mr. Gates wrote his memo, those negotiations had collapsed.

Mr. Gates's memo appears to reflect concerns in the upper echelons of the Pentagon and the military that the White House did not have a well-prepared series of alternatives in place in case all the diplomatic steps finally failed. In fact, just before Mr. Gates issued his warning, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, wrote an official "chairman's guidance" to his staff saying that while any military option would have "limited results" against Iran's nuclear facilities, preparations needed to be stepped up.

"Should the president call for military options, we must have them ready," the admiral wrote.

Administration officials testifying before a Senate committee last week made it clear that those preparations were under way. So did General Jones. "The president has made it clear from the beginning of this administration that we need to be prepared for every possible contingency," he said in the interview. "That is what we have done from day one, while successfully building a coalition of nations to isolate Iran and pressure it to live up to its obligations."

At the same hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Lt. Gen. Ronald L. Burgess Jr., director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and Gen. James E. Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and one of the military's most experienced officers on nuclear matters, said that Iran could produce bomb-grade fuel for at least one nuclear weapon within a year, but that it would probably need two to five years to manufacture a workable atomic bomb.

The administration has been stepping up efforts to contain the influence of Iran and counter its missiles, including placing Patriot anti-missile batteries, mostly