

The Iranian Bomb

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Iran is determined to acquire nuclear weapons. Iran has resisted all diplomatic pressures to freeze its nuclear program and seems intent on producing highly-enriched uranium, which constitutes the critical stage in building a nuclear bomb. The relative success of Hezbollah – one of Teheran's proxies - to withstand the pressure of the Israeli army this summer, strengthened Iran's position in the Middle East. Moreover, the lack of an effective international response to the North Korean nuclear test of October 2006 provided Iran with additional confidence that its nuclear program cannot be interrupted. This brief sketches the nature of the Iranian threat, and the available options for halting that country's nuclear program.

The Nature of the Threat

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a jihadist foreign policy agenda. The Iranian quest for nuclear weapons is primarily designed to acquire regional hegemony, to be able to oppose American policies and to deter possible American action against the radical Islamic regime.

Iran possesses Sheehab-3 long-range missiles (range: 1,500 kilometers) that can probably be nuclear-tipped, and is currently working on further extending the range of its ballistic arsenal. This puts in range all the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian sub-continent and Eastern Europe.

The emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran would inevitably have a chain-effect, generating further proliferation in the region. Middle East leaders, who invariably have high threat perceptions, are unlikely to look nonchalantly on a nuclear Iran. States such as Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq would hardly be able to resist the temptation to counter Iranian influence by adopting similar nuclear postures. A multipolar nuclear Middle East would be a strategic nightmare.

A nuclear Iran would also enhance Iranian hegemony in the oil-rich Persian Gulf area, as well as in the Caspian Basin. Giving revolutionary Iran a handle over this energy reservoir, which contains much of the world's hydrocarbon reserves, would further strengthen Iran's position in the energy market. Because such a position would also make Iran's containment even more difficult, it would necessarily embolden Islamic radicals everywhere.

Teheran encourages the radical Shiite elements in Iraq in order to promote the establishment of another Islamic republic. Moreover, Iran is allied with Syria, another radical state with an anti-American predisposition, and

seeks to create a radical corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean. Iran also lends critical support to terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

The Inadequacy of a "Balance of Terror" or a Defensive Posture

While a nuclear Iran is a serious threat to the US and many other states, for Israel it presents an existential challenge. The statements made by new Iranian president Mahmud Ahmedinijad calling for the obliteration of Israel from the map of the Middle East are a clear warning. Such Iranian statements from high-ranking officials cannot be dismissed as pure rhetoric; they reflect a policy preference.

There are policy wonks who release rosy evaluations regarding a potentially stable "balance of terror" between Israel and Iran, modeled on the relationship between the two superpowers during the Cold War. Yet, such a bilateral relationship, where the two sides deter each other, cannot be easily emulated in the Middle East. Mutual deterrence is never automatic, and could not be taken for granted even between the US and the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, the situation in the Middle East is even less stable.

A second-strike capability, which allows a state to respond in kind after being subjected to a nuclear attack, is critical in establishing credible deterrence. Yet, maintaining a second-strike capability is an ongoing process requiring continuous improvement, which depends to a large extent on the adversary's actions. Such a process is inherently uncertain and ambiguous. Furthermore, before an initial "effective" second-strike capability is achieved, a nuclear race may create the fear of a first-strike nuclear attack, which might in itself trigger a nuclear exchange. This is all the more probable because adequate warning systems cannot be erected when the distances between enemies are so small, as is the case in the Middle East.

While it can be argued that Middle East leaders behave rationally, their sensitivity to costs and their attitudes to human life hardly conform to Western values. Iranian leaders have said that they are ready to pay a heavy price for the destruction of the Jewish state. Such an inclination raises questions as to the effectiveness of Israeli nuclear deterrence.

The uncertainties surrounding Israel's ability to parry a nuclear missile attack are an additional reason to fear a hostile nuclear Iran. While Israel has developed its own ballistic missile defense system based on the Arrow missile, no defense system is foolproof. The Arrow system does not have a one hundred percent interception rate. Moreover, it is not clear how the Arrow will function if the enemy uses saturation tactics or if its missiles are equipped with countermeasures.

In summary, even Israel, the technologically most advanced Middle Eastern state, faces uncertainties in establishing stable deterrence and an effective defensive system. Other Middle East powers would inevitably be left to the mercy of the Ayatollahs. Therefore, Teheran's military nuclear program must be stopped.

Blocking Iran's Nuclear Aspirations

There are several ways to deal with the Iranian nuclear challenge.

Diplomacy

The current European approach is to provide incentives to Iran to cooperate on the nuclear issue. Yet, this policy has little chance of halting the Iranian nuclear progress. Indeed, the Iranians have rejected the European "carrots" offered to them. The naked truth is that the West has nothing to offer that can dissuade the Ayatollahs from going nuclear.

The US decided to go through the motions required by the Europeans in order to secure their support for a more militant approach when appeasement runs its course. Currently, Washington hopes that the UN Security Council will impose economic sanctions on Iran. Yet, this course of action serves Iranian interests in gaining time as its strategy is one that can be termed "talk and build". Even if sanctions are imposed by all members of the international community, the efficacy of such measures is doubtful, particularly when regimes are ready to pay a high price for maintaining their policy choices.

Regime Change

Such a strategy is advantageous as it rests on domestic dynamics, and minimizes Iranian antagonism towards the American activist approach. Yet, whatever measures taken so far by the U.S. to destabilize the Iranian regime have remained ineffective. Noteworthy, the Islamic regime, like other dictatorships, has survived due to good security services that were successful in suppressing opposition forces. Finally, the progress in the nuclear program leaves little time for political engineering.

The Threat to Use, or the Actual Use of Force

Many experts exaggerate the difficulties in dealing a severe military blow to the Iranian nuclear program. What we know of the locations of Iranian nuclear installations seems to be enough to allow partial destruction of the country's nuclear program, which would be enough to cripple Iran's ability to go nuclear in the near future. Moreover, no large-scale invasion is needed in order to do the job, but only surgical air strikes combined with limited ground operations conducted by special forces.

The American military definitely has the military muscle and the sophistication needed to perform a preemptive strike. In fact, a clear and credible American ultimatum that includes an unequivocal threat to use force might be enough to convince the Iranians to freeze their nuclear program and wait for better times to complete it.

Any decision to use force must take into consideration the Iranian reaction to a military strike and prepare for it. The Iranians can influence the flow of oil from the Gulf, launch a counter-attack with ballistic missiles (with conventional warheads), and/or use proxy terrorist organizations to attack the US and its allies, in particular Israel. The West (including Israel) can bear the limited 'cost' likely to be exacted by conventional missile attacks and terrorism. Meddling with the oil flow is an affront to the well-being of the international community and would put Iran in conflict with most of the world. American inaction when confronted by Iranian attempts to block the Hormuz Straits is highly improbable.

If the US refrains from action, Israel will face the difficult decision of whether to act unilaterally. While less suited to do the job than the US, the Israeli military is capable of reaching the appropriate targets in Iran.

Conclusion

A nuclear Iran is a serious threat to its regional neighbors with far-reaching repercussions beyond the Middle East. Iran's deeply rooted ideological hostility towards Israel, coupled with its emerging military capabilities puts the Jewish state in a particularly vulnerable position. Diplomacy and economic sanctions are doomed to fail, leaving only the threat to use force and the actual use of force as viable options to delay the fruition of the Iranian nuclear program. Resolute action against Iranian nuclear installations involves many risks, but inaction, it seems, will lead to far worse consequences.

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