The Iran Case: Addressing Why Countries Want Nuclear Weapons

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What Happens If Iran Gets "The Bomb"?

Iran's possible development of nuclear weapons has now come front and center in U.S. foreign policy, as well as in consideration overall of preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. It has assumed particular importance because of its potential to reshape the security and politics of an already turbulent and critical region. In the middle of the Middle East, such a capability would at the very least lead to a basic reassessment by countries near and far of a full range of security, political, and other issues.

As the saga of a widely presumed but not admitted Iranian nuclear weapons program unfolds, with its on-again, off-again character, something else is happening: the need for a reassessment of nonproliferation—both how to prevent proliferation and what to do if prevention fails. There is dwindling confidence that a country bent on developing nuclear weapons can forever be prevented from doing so by the now-traditional technological safeguards. In particular, it appears less possible to block the indigenous development of either plutonium or highly enriched uranium, the essential materials for nuclear weapons. Talent and knowledge are not a constraint, and access to fissionable materials may be an ever decreasing one to a country's nuclear ambitions.

Of course, monitored agreements regarding the point, purpose, and conduct of an Iranian civil nuclear power development program, coupled with intrusive inspections, can have a significant impact. Can this approach be relied on? This is one of the questions now under review and the focus of intense political debate regarding negotiations between the Iranian government and a Western troika of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Perhaps the outcome of these negotiations will be sufficient, but perhaps not. For some observers, if Iran were truly determined to get nuclear weapons, it would find a means either to conduct a covert program or at some point to renounce the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), expel inspectors, and work to break out of any restrictive regime.

If there is decreasing confidence that technical means can suffice to prevent a determined and scientifically advanced society from getting "the bomb" and if questions remain about the efficacy of agreements, limitations, and inspection regimes, then other considerations come into play, and other questions must be posed. Most importantly, we need to ask why Iran or any other country would want to acquire nuclear weapons in the first place. Then we must see whether and, within appropriate limits, how the country in question can be dissuaded from developing those weapons. The recent Iranian pause in its enrichment activities allows the West, particularly the United States, the opportunity to explore this possibility before either resorting to military force or merely fretting that Iran is on the path to the destabilizing development of nuclear weapons.

Addressing the Demand

Addressing the demand side of proliferation is not a trivial or secondary approach. Indeed, it should be at the heart of nonproliferation analysis and strategy. Unfortunately, it is often downplayed, especially in the United States, where for many years the emphasis has been either on technical means of limiting the spread of nuclear weapons or, in cases where that appears likely to fail, considering military means to destroy a weapons capability or bringing about a change in regime. Yet, this technical/military approach, which has largely ignored the political and security context...
within which weapons decisions are taken, has often blinded both analysts and policymakers to other possibilities. After all, a wide range of countries capable of building nuclear weapons, including many living in actual or potential security “conflict zones,” have elected not to pursue this option, including Japan and South Korea. Countries such as South Africa and Ukraine have also dismantled existing arsenals.

A good case in point is Libya. It clearly had made steps in the basic groundwork and engineering needed to produce a nuclear weapon although some doubts remain about progress made toward obtaining fissionable materials. Yet, Libyan strongman Moammar Gaddafi has now abandoned his program. From his perspective, this makes good political and strategic sense. After all, a Libyan bomb would offer little deterrent benefit against countries that did not intend to attack Libya in the first place. A nuclear weapon would also have cemented rather than ended Libya’s status as a pariah state and would have done little to influence or intimidate its neighbors. By contrast, renouncing the program brought an end to all economic sanctions and readmission to the Western community of nations. Gaddafi made his move and has been richly rewarded at no palpable cost to Libyan security or prestige. He sold his white elephant at the right price at the right time.

Iran’s Security Motivations

Iran, of course, is in a different neighborhood. To be sure, the United States and its allies have reasons to be bothered about Iran’s behavior, such as its support for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah. But Iran also has reason to be concerned about its security. Its principal antagonist, the United States, for many years not only practiced its dual containment policy against Iran (and Iraq) but also supported expatriate groups bent on overthrowing the regime in Tehran, including through violent means. Regime change in Tehran has been a recurrent theme in U.S. policy as it has been consistently in the policy of Israel, which also strongly supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Iran was accorded a place in the U.S. “axis of evil” and is now even more vulnerable than only a few years ago to nearby U.S. military power. However legitimate these U.S. policies and actions may be, along with the animosity toward Iran of some key regional countries, they do provide an objective basis for Iranian security concerns.

This conclusion does not mean that these concerns should be indulged to the point of accepting Iranian threats to others’ security or even the heightened sense of regional and global insecurity that would result from its possession of nuclear weapons, even if these threats proved to be more psychological and political than strategic and military. It does mean that the United States and its allies need to take stock of the objective threats to Iranian security and consider mitigating them.

Since the end of the 1970s, when the complexion of Iranian politics and its position in the region changed radically, U.S. policy has called for denying Iran the right to defend itself. This was marked by what is now widely recognized as the folly of supporting Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran. That stand likely led Saddam to conclude (accurately) that the United States would mount only a mild protest to his use of chemical weapons against Iran. It clearly emboldened the Iraqi dictator to invade Kuwait in the belief that his U.S. supporter would acquiesce in further aggression.

There is, of course, almost certainly more involved in Iranian thinking about a nuclear weapons program than its own palpable sense of insecurity. The perceived prestige of having nuclear weapons, another “Islamic bomb,” is no doubt one element. Such thinking is misguided because an Iran with nuclear weapons would become even more of a pariah state, especially to many of its Arab neighbors, given religious, political, economic, and other traditional rivalries. Likewise, Iranian policymakers certainly must believe that a nuclear weapon would provide them with enhanced deterrence against a U.S. attack, but the same goal could also be accomplished by the removal of U.S. and similar outside threats to Iran.

More important to Iran is the matter of power and presence in the Persian Gulf. With the defeat of Iraq—a country now many years away from being in a position to compete for power in the region—and with rising risks of turmoil in Saudi Arabia, Iran is in a better position to compete for pride of place in the Gulf. Arguably, Iranian nuclear weapons could be a card to play in a contest for influence. That assumes that such a competition might be limited to the region and that Iran or any other regional actor could aspire to the role of the most influential country in the Gulf. Such an assumption makes little sense given the almost certain deep engagement of the United States and
its allies in the Middle East militarily, economically, and politically for the foreseeable future.

**A New Approach to Iran**

Taken together, these points argue for an approach by the West that includes two factors: reassurances to Iran that its own security will not be put at risk by Western actions, provided, of course, that Iran does not provoke such threats; and the development of a regional security and political structure that could include Iran and all other countries, as well as external powers including the United States.

Many commentators argue that Iran has been provided such assurances in the past, as well as clear road maps for rejoining the international community of nations, but has rejected them. Others, however, question whether such approaches to Tehran have been seriously or consistently pursued. Indeed, the case can be made that every time possibilities of breaking the diplomatic logjam have arisen, various U.S. administrations have raised the bar—making desired results of negotiations conditions for starting them and refusing all formal direct contacts with Iran. A notable missed chance came in May 2003 when a credible offer to negotiate by the Iranian leadership was conveyed to Washington by the Swiss representative of U.S. interests in Tehran. Perhaps it was real, perhaps bogus, but it was never tested. This Iranian offer was even largely ignored in the American media.

In normal diplomatic practice, the course should be obvious: to seek direct negotiations with the government in Tehran. The talks should be based on two propositions: U.S. and Western sensitivity to legitimate Iranian security concerns including an offer to readmit Iran to the outside world, full relations with the West, and an end to economic sanctions; and the need for Iran to take the necessary steps to give reassurance to others of its peaceful intentions and behavior, including on its nuclear programs, terrorism, the Arab-Israeli peace process, and its role in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Furthermore, as part of any comprehensive effort to deal with Iran, both in general and regarding nuclear weapons specifically, the West needs to work toward a wide-ranging security system for the region that would embrace Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the Gulf Emirates, Jordan, and post-settlement Israel and Palestine. The alternative is for the United States and other Western states to remain pinned to the region as sole providers of security for the indefinite future—an option that is likely to prove militarily costly and politically unpopular.

The twin process suggested here, simple in construction but complex in resolution, has now become an essential element not just in the effort to deal with an Iranian nuclear weapons program and to thwart its coming to completion, but also an essential element of worldwide nonproliferation strategy. In the case of Iran, a combination of reassurances on security, implied threats to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons, an offer of direct U.S.-Iranian negotiations, U.S. support for European diplomacy, and reasonable conditions for removing all economic sanctions on Iran and reengaging it in the international community possibly may not work. These steps should at least be pursued before either contemplating the use of military force or reluctantly accepting as inevitable an Iranian bomb.

More broadly, the Western nonproliferation strategy needs to incorporate on a comprehensive and systematic basis the range of considerations that relate to the motivations of countries to acquire nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction and the possibilities of dealing successfully with such motivations.

This is an area that to date has not been well explored, but this approach must be elevated to the front rank given the long-term weaknesses of purely technical approaches and because acquiring weapons of mass destruction is a political act designed to achieve political purposes. The case of Iran must be the first test case, and this parallel political approach must be pursued seriously, assiduously, and sincerely as an effort to deal with real security problems rather than to pursue other, less important agendas, open or hidden. Too much is at stake for it to be otherwise.

**What Happens if Iran Gets the Bomb?**
What will happen if Iran gets “the bomb”? In contemplating this possibility, some analysts throw up their hands in horror, others are relatively calm about the results, and still others deny the possibility of such an outcome. Nevertheless, any realistic U.S. policy must consider such a scenario.

One frequently expressed concern is that Iran would consider its nuclear weapons capability to be held in trust for the Islamic world or would give custody of a weapon to someone else, perhaps even a terrorist group. Such an outcome is theoretically possible, but not very probable. With one notable and quickly regretted exception—Soviet transfer of some U-235 to China in the 1950s—no country with bomb-making fissionable materials has knowingly transferred them to anyone else.

More useful to consider is the role that nuclear weapons would play in shaping post-nuclear Iran’s relationships with its neighbors—friends and foes. When all is said and done, such weapons would have little military utility except for deterrence. This would operate at four levels: to deter a conventional attack from a non-nuclear regional power; to deter an openly nuclear regional state—today only including Pakistan and India; to deter Israel; or to deter a major external power, notably the United States but, in theory at least, also including Russia.

The first case is obvious: no country with just conventional arms is likely to try the patience of a nuclear power. But in the other three cases, “proportional deterrence” would come into play. Originally developed by France, this doctrine holds that a relatively less-capable nuclear power such as Iran can deter a much stronger nuclear power (the United States, Russia, Pakistan, India, Israel) if it is viewed as able and willing to destroy “value targets” in the attacking nation even while it is being obliterated. This complex doctrine can be summarized as the “death throes” of a country under nuclear or even extreme conventional attack.

Such a doctrine depends on the potential attacker such as the United States or Israel calculating that the targets in its own country that would be destroyed in retaliation would be more “valuable” to it than the benefit (military or political) of annihilating Iran. Of course, proportional deterrence can only succeed if the potential retaliation is credible, hence the need for a survivable second-strike capability. The threat of retaliation must not be so precise that the original attacking nation can calculate with precision whether the game is worth the candle (uncertainty principle). There should also be a margin for the leadership of the attacked nation to over-respond (irrationality principle). All these ideas were worked out in detail during the Cold War.

By the same token, of course, Iran would also be subject to deterrence, as it is today by Israel, in particular. Indeed, recent commentary about Iranian advances in missile technology may not be related to a future nuclear arsenal. They are more likely to be an attempt to gain the ability to launch relatively accurate conventional warheads at Israel, counting on that capability to have some proportional deterrent effect on Israel if, for example, that country was inclined to launch an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities like that on the Iraqi Osirak reactor in 1981.

These calculations can be elaborated further. What they add up to is an Iran with one or more nuclear weapons that would not, per se, have a destabilizing effect on security in the region. That would be very much “scenario dependent.” Nevertheless, as with all issues involving nuclear weapons, psychology and politics are critical elements. Indeed, if they were not—if the world had not witnessed Hiroshima and Nagasaki—we would likely have seen much more proliferation over the past 60 years, as many analysts long predicted, or even the further use of nuclear weapons in war.

As things now stand in the Middle East and are likely to stand for the foreseeable future, a nuclear-armed Iran would change the politics and the security of the region dramatically in terms of perceptions. The point need hardly be spelled out. Further, even if regional and outside countries could in time adjust to a nuclear-armed Iran, judged from today, it is highly unlikely that Iran would be permitted to gain such a capability. The United States, Israel, or perhaps some third-party would likely use whatever means necessary to prevent Iran from ever getting into that position.
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