

Achieving the Vision of a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

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Regional Conflicts and Nuclear Dangers

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Concern about nuclear weapons may be increasing at precisely the time when their limitations are becoming more apparent by the day. Yet there appears to be a disconnect between the laudable efforts of northerners to try and reduce to zero the importance of NWs and other states who may be in the process of discovering (in their view) the benefits of NWs. While China is building up and Iran, Korea and others seek a capability, existing NWS ask themselves what conceivable use they have in the modern world. In this post-modern world the inequality of the NPT appears starker, discriminatory and more gratuitously offensive than before.

Part of the concern of northern states is about further proliferation (“cascade”). But it seems that concern is warranted as much by the nature of the proliferating states. For in an era of designations of ‘rogue’ and ‘evil’ states and asymmetrical strategies, questions are raised about the new states’ motives, and even more about their eventual behaviour once in possession of such capabilities. It is difficult to see Korea’s motives as driven by regional conflicts as opposed to regime security, bargaining chip, equalizer. The same applies to Iran with the added motive of status and domestic legitimation. If this is even partially correct, it may be that dampening regional conflict will have little impact on their pursuit of nuclear capability. If states in insecure regions develop nuclear capabilities as a hedge, even eliminating regional conflicts if that were possible, would not remove incentives for an insurance policy. Uncertainty as much as actual regional conflict may be a driver. Similarly status concerns or importance attributed to ‘independence’ may be drivers of nuclear ambitions, independent of regional conflicts.

Regional conflicts are very different. On the subcontinent there is the classical situation of two adversaries with a history of conflict. In this case the asymmetries in conventional capacities and the sense of existential threat felt by one party (already

once dismembered) is the most susceptible to solutions geared at reducing the nuclear danger by dealing the regional conflict. Even here the driving motive for India was less regional than China and global status. Global status may be an Iranian driver as well.

What are the nuclear dangers posed by regional conflicts?

In abstract they are

- a) the deliberate use of NWS / or use through miscalculation
- b) leakage (transfers, theft, incompetence)
- c) further proliferation ('chains')

How can nuclear dangers be reduced dealing with regional conflicts?

In principle this can be done by

- a) eliminating regional conflicts and
- b) reducing the nuclear dangers in the face of the persistence of regional conflicts.

The Middle East Case(s)

Israel developed NWS when it felt weak relative to a potentially overwhelming Arab coalition, friendless and with the experience of the Holocaust fresh in mind. The development of a "last resort" weapon appeared prudent before 1967 when Israel's conventional superiority was not yet apparent. Since then Israel has not brandished its NWS in various wars and intifadahs and its basic irrelevance and fading salience vis a vis the Palestinians has been apparent for the past decade and a half. Then Iraq and now Iran's ambitions revived it.

Israel has been prepared to discuss the elimination of NWS *after* a sustainable peace settlement, while Egypt in the post Madrid ACRS talks insisted in the 1990's that these discussions take place *before* a settlement.

Israel's policy of ambiguity is intended to reduce the pressure on others to follow suit. But its opacity is also dictated as a deterrent against a possible resort by others to the use of chemical or biological weapons.

Iran's case is very different. Its security rationale, strenuously denied, has varied over time; from Saddam Hussein to the US. It more likely driven by status and insurance imperatives as well as to solidify its domestic standing. Never a crash programme, it has been characterised by persistence over two decades and with the end in sight shows fewer signs of flexibility. What that "end" might be is not known for certain,

even to the Iranians themselves, who appear to be flirting with the idea of becoming a “threshold” state, just short of weaponization and hence still in the treaty. There is no clear conception in Iran what purpose such a status would serve other than references to “right to technology” and guarded references to the equalizer function of such a status.

Iran is involved in no regional conflicts in which nuclear weapons have any relevance. Iran has no historical enemy, no existential threat (comparable to Pakistan or even Israel).

The linkage to Israel is discretionary and contrived; no animosity exists between the two states that are not due to Tehran’s own making. Absent the regime change rhetoric (a recent phenomenon) nuclear weapons serve no purpose vis a vis the US either. Iran’s conception of “regime security”, however, may be another matter. A generous conclusion must be that Iran’s nuclear ambitions are motivated by uncertainty rather than an urgent strategic imperative; by status rather than regional conflict.

If Iran has no clear conception of what NWS are useful for, but is determined to get as close to them as possible, what are the implications? There are numerous characteristics of the regime and the region which make the prospect of nuclear proliferation especially sensitive.

- The region has multiple, overlapping conflicts at various levels.
- Distances are short, missiles abundant and warning times limited.
- The political systems of the region are opaque, with little communication among them.
- Ambiguity of aims compound the problem of assessing intentions;
- Incentives exist for asymmetrical strategies (Rafsanjani, 2001).

As for regime characteristics we need point to a few.

- A practice of referring deliberately and ambiguously to joining “the nuclear club” and the benefits thereof.

- An indifference to others security concerns (“We don’t care what others think” after the recent “space” missile launch. “Death to Israel” graffiti on missiles, etc, etc.)
- A ‘spoiler’ strategy in the region in which Iran undercuts moderates in the region supporting the hardline rejectionists (Hamas, Islamic Jihad) with arms, funds and training.
- A strategy that seeks to use regional instabilities to weaken and drive the US from the region and supplant it as the dominant power.
- A strategy of indirection, alternating smile and menace, toward its smaller Gulf neighbours.
- Inchoate goals such as *independence, respect, equality* together with inconsistent policies that do not generate predictability or trust and which, by their nature, appear difficult to realize outside a therapist’s office.

Recent events in the region demonstrate instability, miscalculation and the risks of escalation.

The 2006 war in Lebanon and the 2007 Israeli air-strike at targets in Syria both reflect the shadow that Iran’s nuclear ambitions have cast on the region. In both cases Israel intended to “restore” deterrence by sending a message to Iran about its sensitivity to probes and to the development of WMD in the region. (For the Syrian case see S. Hersh, The New Yorker Feb11, 2008). Iran’s capture of British sailors (2004, 2007), its “swarming“ of US destroyers in the Gulf and its activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, risk a response that could see a rapid escalation to another level. Iran, though, risk averse, is not crisis averse. Tehran welcomes crises as opportunities to exploit its indirect strategies, reinforce domestic repression, while playing the victim and waiting for others to defuse the situation.

The dangers of this approach are evident in the Lebanon war. Crises cannot be finely calibrated and tuned if both sides do not see the issue in the same way. Iran, in effect, is engaged in a proxy war with both the US and Israel, giving missiles and IED to their adversaries. The question is whether a regime minded to do this now, would become more moderate once it is clearly near a nuclear capability? Should Iran seek to extend deterrence to Hezbollah, or to support Hezbollah and sanctuarize itself, what would the Israeli reaction be? Can Israel trust that Iran’s missiles will “only” be

armed with conventional weapons? How much attention should be paid to Holocaust denial and Tehran's insistence on a "martyrdom culture"?

Iran's tendency to blow hot and cold, to insist on its rights while denying others' legitimate interests; to promote Muslim solidarity while interfering in Arab politics; to insist on its victimhood and grievances ("the world owes us something" Khamene'i June 2007) while fostering its own ambitions, all of these suggest a state likely to misjudge situations and overplay its hand when the stakes are higher.

So what are the regional characteristics that feed the nuclear danger? These can be summarized thus:

- 1) *Crisis instability*. Short distances, multiple instabilities, inadequate communication, conflicting interests.
- 2) *Miscalculation* Iraq demonstrated this several times in the past two decades. Iran's behaviour consistently focuses on its own concerns, slights others and counts on slipping by on its native cunning. Oblivious to others' sensitivities, Iran with an opaque system and a nuclear capability is prone to over-reach.
- 3) *Leakage*. Whether from insecure installations or deliberate transfer, this risk is as real as the related one of unauthorised use or uncertain command authority. (The most reliable ideologically are the most zealous) As with A.Q.Khan, ideology and commercial considerations could be difficult to disentangle.
- 4) *Nuclear proliferation*. The rich, underpopulated Gulf states are inherently weak. Their dependence on the US, at once weakened and increased since 2001, gives them little confidence in dealing with Tehran. The record of US incompetence, arrogance, and misjudgement leaves them with two other choices: appeasement of Tehran or cultivation of an equivalent capability. In fact, the GCC states, who now clearly recognize their primary security threat comes from Iran not Israel, will try to do both without 'leaving hold of nurse.'

What can/needs to be done?

It should be clear that while Iran's nuclear ambitions are the new, destabilizing element in the region, (and compound the latent problem of what to do about Israel's nuclear status) it is more the interaction of these ambitions and regional instabilities that are the main problem. These instabilities are numerous with the Palestinian question (and now civil war), Lebanon, and Iraq in the centre of a

region of turbulence. Added to this are Iran's ambitions for regional dominance and the expulsion of the US which aggravate instability. How to reduce nuclear dangers stemming from this?

Dealing with it by accepting Iran's "right" to limited enrichment in exchange for intrusive inspections has been suggested. (ICG)

Another suggestion is that Iran seeks nuclear enrichment to become "recognized as a regional power" and that it "is not possible to separate Uranium enrichment from regional security". The same source suggests that dealing with Iran means dealing with Israel as well. (M. Al Barade'i, *Al Hayat*, 2008).

A third suggestion (by a French diplomat, MEI, WashDC. Feb.2008) is that in dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions it is necessary to concede Iran its regional role and status.

None of these are very helpful.

The first fails to ask how dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions separate from its regional behaviour will settle the main problem i.e. regional conflicts.

The second seems to be saying that dealing with the regional security is a pre-requisite for dealing with enrichment and concludes that Iran wants recognition as a "regional power" failing to ask that whether this is as a revisionist /revolutionary or a status quo power. The French diplomat also misses the point: what regional role are we talking about?

Let's simply say that too many people who believe they were "right on Iraq" or who favour "diplomacy over force" are writing about a subject on which they are deeply ignorant.

What are our goals given the interaction of nuclear dangers and regional conflicts?

Three stages seem indicated.

1. To *stabilize* the region. This can be done by extending assurances, including deterrence, offsetting destabilising forces, moderating disputes (peace processes, third party mediation, etc). This would include crisis management mechanisms including promotion of communication among adversaries, hot lines, strategic dialogues (redlines), regional arms control discussions (e.g. ACRS), and exploration of NFZ and WMDFZ. All of these would be intended to build confidence and habits of consultation. Besides deterrence and containment, measures that seek to keep the Iranian capability virtual are

necessary. Sanctions, together with a package of incentives for changed behaviour (*not* simply foregoing full scale enrichment) should be offered. Eliminating regime change rhetoric is the other part of the package.

2. *Preventing further proliferation.* Reassurances and guarantees need to be extended, possibly with appropriate conventional technology. Building a firewall between nuclear energy and nuclear weapons is essential. Several suggestions about limiting enrichment in exchange of guarantees of supplies/price are on the table. The important point is to avoid singularisation that accentuates feelings of victimisation or discrimination. PSI, the application of the Additional Protocol and control of technology transfers will need to be heightened.
3. *Rolling back* nuclear programmes, and ambitions. This stage addresses the ‘root causes’ of instability/conflict, including comprehensive peace agreements where appropriate. Building on the dialogues noted in stage 1, would be the creation of inclusive regional security institutions. These would focus on region wide measures such as NFZ/WMDfZ. From what we know about rollback or renunciation of the nuclear option, this is likely to take place either when there is a shift in the regional security environment and/or in the domestic one. The South Africa case suggests both were necessary. The South American cases suggest changes in the domestic political system had something to do with it. (Solingen).

It is sometimes suggested that irrespective of regime Iran would seek a nuclear option. I believe this is mistaken. However, even if this were the case, the chances of a different regime that is more open, moderate and status quo-oriented, limiting its ambition and being more sensitive to others concerns (as well as its own citizenry) makes me more confident of restrained regional responses and the prospect of an eventual roll-back.

All of this is not to suggest that dealing with Iran will settle all the problems of the region. Far from it, but as the regime itself likes to boast, no issue in the region can be settled without it. And this means dealing with its regional role rather than seeking a technical fix. To theological non-proliferationists this may smack of heresy, but there you are.