



Iran and the Nuclear Conundrum A War in Waiting?

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Fresh economic sanctions and the isolationist strategy of the West - the US and Europeans are once again driven by their dispute with Iran over its clandestine nuclear weapons programme. Despite the series of talks and negotiations over a decade both at multilateral and bilateral levels, the issue remains unresolved. It seems the western countries have lost their patience over futile talks and given up easily in face of a recalcitrant Iran as well as a restive Israel. Described widely as one of the major foreign and security policy challenges of this century, policy makers across the world are preoccupied with the approach to resolve this nuclear stalemate amicably, which otherwise has the potential to cause a nuclear holocaust in the Middle East.

The nuclear impasse between the West and Iran has gathered clouds of war over the Middle East recently. It has also instigated anxiety among developing countries such as China, India, Brazil and Turkey and put their energy security interests on high bet. As one of the largest oil-producing and exporting country in the Persian Gulf, Iran plays a crucial role in global energy security and economic stability. Its geographical position in the

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Middle East and demographic composition posit Iran as an inevitable regional power surrounded by hostile neighbours and erratic regimes. After the unsuccessful Iraq war in 2003, the western countries, duped by their own confidant - Israel and its intelligentsia - to oust Saddam regime, began to believe that Iran is posing the real WMD (nuclear) threat to the region as well as to the world. So, what is wrong with Iran?

It is alleged that Iran has been pursuing nuclear weapons programme clandestinely violating international nuclear norms and thus posing an existential threat to Israel in particular, and to the world in general. Is nuclear Iran actually a threat to international peace and security? Iran consistently maintains that its nuclear programme is peaceful and the expansion of the programme is driven by its requirements to meet the country's future energy needs, as its current fossil fuel resources are gradually depleting and it may run out of fossil fuels after 40 years. Therefore, Iran needs alternative energy sources and it believes that nuclear energy is the best and clean alternative energy source.

As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran reiterates that it has every right to develop nuclear energy and expand its programme. However, the western countries, especially the US and the Europeans are skeptical about Iran's nuclear intention and simultaneously subscribe to Israel's perception that Iran is building nuclear weapons and poses a threat to regional stability and global security. Technically, Iran's unwavering effort to produce Highly-enriched Uranium (HEU), which can be used to build nuclear warheads easily, may convince one, that Iran is in

the process of developing nuclear weapons under the garb of civilian programme. This prompts one to question the motivations for Iran's nuclear weapon ambition. The obvious answer is pure security reasons or considerations.

What worsened the situation further is the security dilemma between Iran and Israel accelerated by the latter's 'policy of deliberate ambiguity' with respect to nuclear status. In order to bring this stalemate to an end, the European Union (EU) along with the US and international nuclear regimes held series of negotiations and talks with Iran since 2004. Alas, these efforts to persuade Iran to relinquish nuclear weapon ambition turned out to be futile. It seems a war is waiting to happen as Israel is already pointing its guns towards Iran and this nuclear deadlock between the west and Iran needs to be resolved before it turns into a catastrophic war. This issue brief seeks to explore the best way out of this crisis.

I

WHY WOULD IRAN WANT TO ACQUIRE NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

Iran's rationale to acquire nuclear weapons can be presumed as either out of sheer necessity or mere vanity. What necessitates Iran to tread a tough path of acquiring nuclear weapons? A bevy of literature is devoted to finding an answer to this question largely divided into two strands of opinion: Nukes for luxury or for necessity. Here the international relations theory, which sheds some lights on states nuclear rationale in general, may help us to understand the Iran's rationale for nuclear weapons programme.

According to Kenneth Waltz nations want nuclear weapons for several reasons (Waltz, 1981:7-8). Most prominent are: a country without nuclear allies will want nuclear weapons all the more if some of its adversaries have them and a country may want nuclear weapons because it lives in fear of its adversaries' present or future

Iran's rationale to acquire nuclear weapons can be presumed as either out of sheer necessity or mere vanity. The main factor that drives Iran's nuclear weapon ambition is Israel's foreign and security policy. Therefore, national security considerations and calculation based on the regional dynamics could be the sole reason for Iran's nuclear weapons choice.

conventional strength. As far as Iran is concerned 'Balance of Power' and deterrence purpose would be most appropriate reason for Iran's nuclear weapon choice. Iran does not ally with any nuclear weapon countries as like its immediate hostile neighbour Israel does with U.S. And also Iran still perceives threat from Israel's growing conventional and non-conventional strength. To brace this argument that Iran wants nuclear weapons for purely security reasons particularly military applications, Ehsanesh I. Sadr avers that military application of nuclear technology is of great interest to the Iranian authorities, whether they intend to actually build a bomb or merely ensure that they have the ability to do so if necessary.

Beyond this conventional wisdom, there are still echoings in the academia that by building nuclear weapons a country may hope to enhance its international standing. However, this argument sounds inappropriate as Iran's choice because of its domestic political ambiguity and its international nuclear credibility. Waltz explains this too, that nuclear military business is a serious one, and one may expect that deeper motives than desire for prestige lie behind the decision to enter it. Thus nuclear prestige may not be major reason for Iran's nuclear weapons choice rather its national security considerations or calculation depends on its regional dynamics could be the sole reason for its nuclear weapons choice. However, Iran, which became a non-Nuclear Weapon State (NNWS) by default after signing NPT, now appears to have reconsidered its position or options mainly due to its changing external security environment and domestic political imperatives.

For Iran, political instability in the Middle East region particularly its neighbouring States like Iraq and the Israel-Palestine conflict could have led to a nuclear weapons option. Supporting this is T.V. Paul's argument that nuclear choices of potential proliferators are likely to be greatly influenced by the security environment and conflict level of its region. However, he does not deny the role of great power in shaping the regional power equation by active involvement in the regional conflicts between emerging regional powers and its inferior adversaries.

Thus a great power active in a region could be part of the security complex, most often by imposing, but sometimes by receiving, negative and positive security externalities. For example, the US is an active member of the regional security complex of both the Middle East and East Asia. The US preponderance in the Middle East

particularly its support to Israel and its foreign policy irked other States that are hostile towards Israel. This would definitely alter the regional power equation in Middle East. It was reported that Iran's nuclear expansion programme involves obtaining technology to produce Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU). Iran is benefited from A.Q. Khan's nuclear black market where it is alleged to have acquired enrichment technology violating international nuclear norms.

However, most significantly, the main factor that drives Iran's nuclear weapon ambition is Israel's foreign and security policy. In 2002, the Israel government commissioned a project to study the strategic future of Israel. The project team submitted its final report titled "project Daniel" in 2003 and identified the overriding existential threats to Israel and their prospective remedies. It includes Iran and Iraq as existential threats to Israel and recommended Israel to do whatever possible to prevent Iran from possessing WMD and to develop military capabilities to pre-empt these. Iraq fell victim to Israel's misguided foreign and security policy. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue that "Israel manipulated intelligence in such a way as to make it seem as if Saddam posed an imminent threat." The Iraq War had not only opened the US eyes but also alarmed Iran to further its nuclear weapons programme. They also observe that "Israel's nuclear arsenal is one reason some of its neighbours want nuclear weapons, and threatening them with regime change merely increases that desire."

II

IS NUCLEAR IRAN A SERIOUS THREAT?

Israel tells it is and the west believes so. But, it is emphatically argued on the contrary that when the region could live with nuclear Pakistan and India and the west could live with nuclear Soviet and North Korea, one can also live with nuclear Iran. However, nuclear Iran is not desirable for the sake of universal good. From a realistic perspective, one can argue that given Israel's nuclear ambiguity nuclear Iran may stabilize the region and perhaps constrain Israel's expansionist policy. This argument stems from balance-of-power and regional security architecture theories. However, the ground reality is opaque, which paints a bleak or uncertain future for the region. The stalemate will continue as long as Israel maintains its ambiguous nuclear policy and revisionist neighborhood policy. Neither Iran nor Israel has declared officially or hinted slightly that they possess nuclear warheads or weapons thus creating a space for security dilemma to operate.

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Moreover, the Middle East is the most volatile region in the world even though most of the oil reserves are from the region. Religion, race, ethnicity, culture, identity, and natural resources all play a crucial role in abetting conflicts among nations in the region. Since the creation of Israel as a country, which enraged Islamic world, this region has been witnessing devastating war, political instability and radicalization of the society. Also, the region is not immune to interference from external powers such as US, Europe and Russia. The US' role is especially significant because of its superpower status and capacity to arbitrate global issues unilaterally. As far as US' Middle East policy is concerned, it is largely centered on Israel and is in consonance with Israel's national interest. But there is a deviation in US policy circles, which surfaced after unsuccessful Iraq war, that US should have discreet Middle East policy that would cultivate a benign image in the region. The recent public opinion in the US shows majority of Americans support diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear issues through negotiations under international norms and are completely averse to military solution to the problem.

III

THE WAY OUT

The current trend indicates that neither the US nor the Europeans can afford a war with Iran due to ongoing Euro zone crisis and global economic slowdown. It is only Israel and some conservative Zionist lobbies which want to tighten screw on Iran and prefer war against Iran without realizing the devastating consequences and its cascading effects on other regions. India also accused the Israel lobby in an aggressive mode recently over its energy imports from Iran. It seems Israel is manipulating US' interest and policy towards

Middle East and implicates those who associate with Iran on charges of perfidy and anti-Semitism. However, some of the developing countries such as India, China, Brazil and Turkey would not like to sever their bilateral ties with Iran just because Israel wants to do so and also due to energy security imperatives.

Is there a way out of this crisis? Yes, there is and for this three steps are particularly necessary. First, Iran's nuclear issue should not be seen in isolation. Rather, it has to be seen holistically from the regional stability as well as global energy security perspectives. Israel's continuous policies of expansion ignoring its neighbour's security concerns have created a *casus belli* for the crisis.

Second, the international community, especially those who have high stakes in the region, must create a situation that is conducive for open debate on core issues concerning stability and peace of the region. Unless the political crisis between Israel and Palestine is resolved, security and stability of the region cannot be ensured. The past experience illustrates that neither war nor regime change according to Israel's foreign and security interests has stabilised the region rather it breeds only discontent and radicalism.

Lastly, the scope and sequence of the current negotiation/talks with Iran needs to be expanded to include other stakeholders such as India, Turkey and Brazil. The P5+1 or six parties talks had failed to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. It is also not able to reach a common understanding on Iran's nuclear issue. This suggests the need for an international body, may be some sort of International Nuclear Tribunal (INT) for an unbiased arbitration of nuclear related disputes like the one between Israel and Iran. The talks should emphasize the point that nuclear weapons can no longer serve any foreign or security policy objectives. Israel should also be invited to the negotiation table otherwise the nucleomitophobia will remain so forever. A war on Iran is in nobody's interest since the repercussions will not only endanger the region but also the world. Therefore, the only way out is to continue with the negotiations and talks and avoiding a military clash.

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