



The Imperative to Use Force Against Iranian Nuclearization

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Executive Summary: A nuclear Iran constitutes a serious threat, not only to the Middle East, but also to the entire world.. Diplomatic efforts have failed to halt Iran's nuclear program. As the Iranian acquisition of a military nuclear ability nears, the threat of using force, and even the actual use of force, seem to be the only viable preventive measures. Israel cannot live in a nuclear 'balance of terror' with Iran. Military action against Iranian nuclear installations has many risks and is complicated, but the difficulty is exaggerated, and inaction is bound to bring about far worse consequences.

Introduction

Iran is growing closer every day to acquiring nuclear weapons. Teheran has managed to cheat on the IAEA inspections and has built a militarily-significant nuclear program. Iran has resisted all diplomatic pressures to discontinue its progress towards nuclearization and currently seems intent on producing highly-enriched uranium, which constitutes the final and critical stage in building a nuclear bomb. Moreover, 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.

For Israel, the tripartite combination of a radical Islamic regime, long-range missile capability and nuclear weapons is extremely dangerous. Indeed, Israel's Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, recently termed the Iranian program "a grave threat" stressing that Israel "cannot accept a nuclear Iran" (December 1, 2005). The Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Force (IDF), Lt. Gen. Dan Haloutz offered a similar evaluation (December 4, 2005), while a few days earlier the Chief of the IDF Intelligence Department, Maj. Gen. Aharon Zeevi (Farkash) warned that March 2006 constitutes the 'point of no return'; i.e., after that date, any diplomatic efforts to curtail the Iranian nuclear program will be pointless.

This article analyzes the nature of the Iranian threat, the available options for halting that country's nuclear program, and the viability of a military strike aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear effort.

The Nature of the Threat

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the greatest and most urgent threat to the new regional order in the Middle East and to American hegemony in world affairs. Iran actively supports the insurgency in Iraq against the establishment of a pro-American regime that is clearly more liberal than that of Saddam Hussein. Teheran encourages the radical Shiite elements in Iraq in order to promote the establishment of another Islamic republic. It opposes a more liberal regime that could potentially serve as a catalyst for democratization in the area.

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 Hizbullah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Indeed, the Iranian nuclear program is primarily designed to provide a strategic response to American hegemony in world affairs. Teheran wants to be able to continue to oppose American policies and to deter possible American action against the radical Islamic regime.

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

A multi-polar nuclear Middle East would be a recipe for disaster.

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.

The nuclear ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran are, of course, a challenge to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime (the NPT) and to American attempts to curb proliferation in other parts of the world. Further improvements in Iranian missiles would initially put most European capitals, and eventually, the North American continent too, within range of a potential Iranian attack. Uzi Rubin, the father of the Israeli Arrow missile program, said last week (at a conference organized by the BESA Center) that the Iranian capability to launch a satellite – an ability that Iran is aggressively pursuing -- amounts to the country's possession of intercontinental missiles.

The Inadequacy of a "Balance of Terror"

As noted, Israel has shown deep concern about developments in Iran. The despicable statements made by new Iranian president Mahmud Ahmedi-nijad calling for the obliteration of Israel from the map of the Middle East (October and December 2005), only reinforced Israel's fears. Such Iranian statements from high-ranking officials cannot be dismissed as pure rhetoric; they reflect a policy preference.

Israeli fears stem from deep skepticism regarding the possibility of achieving stable deterrence with a nuclear Iran. Unfortunately, there are policy wonks in Israel, the U.S. and elsewhere who belittle such fears by releasing 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.

Such a bilateral relationship, where the two sides deter each other, cannot be easily emulated in the Middle East. A "balance of terror" between two nuclear protagonists 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. During the Cold War, submarines were the main platform for any second-strike capability; the difficulty in locating them under water rendered them less vulnerable to an enemy first-strike attack. Indeed, the Soviet Union and the US relied primarily on the survivability and mobility of submarines, characteristics that would enable them to carry out a second-strike with nuclear-tipped missiles.

While the superpowers possessed large submarine fleets, it is doubtful that Israel owns enough submarines to do the job. It is unclear whether the country's current fleet of three Dolphin-class submarines, to be augmented by the end of the decade by two additional vessels just purchased in Germany, is adequate. Do the Israeli submarines carry enough punch to deter adversaries?

In this context, it is important to note that no fleet can ever be fully operational. Some vessels are in port for maintenance, while others are en route to the designed attack area, or on their way back to the homeport. Furthermore, the most appropriate launching area in the Indian Ocean is far away from Israel.

More significant is the fact that 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. Moreover, 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. The influence of haste and the need to respond quickly can be extremely dangerous.

While it can be argued that Mideastern 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 Inadequacy of a Defensive Posture

The uncertainties surrounding Israel's ability to parry a nuclear missile attack are an additional factor leading Israeli strategists to fear a hostile nuclear Iran. Missiles are the most effective means of delivering nuclear weapons. In 1991, Israel was subject to several attacks by conventionally armed Scud-C missiles from Iraq.

It is true that since the late 1980s Israel has been engaged in developing its own ballistic missile defense system based on the Arrow missile, which is designed to intercept the family of Scud missiles. Since 2000, the country has deployed two operational batteries of Arrow missiles.

Just this month (on December 2), Israel launched an Arrow missile that successfully intercepted a mock-up of an Iranian Shihab-3 missile (a derivative of the Scud). The goal of the test was to expand the range of Arrow missiles to a higher altitude and to evaluate the interface between the Arrow and the American improved Patriot missile system, which is meant to go into operation if the Arrow fails to shoot down its target. The interception of a

missile armed with a nuclear head at a lower altitude by the Patriot system is, of course, problematic.

While this test and others have proven that the Arrow does hit its target, no defense system is foolproof. And indeed, those who developed the Arrow do not claim a one hundred percent interception rate. Moreover, it is not clear how the Arrow will function if enemy missiles are equipped with countermeasures.

Israel has hitherto had the upper hand in the technological race, but there are no assurances that this will always be so. The difficulties Israel faces in dealing with Katyushas, Qassams and tunnels show that Israeli ingenuity may not come up with immediate adequate responses. Even if solutions are eventually devised, there may be windows of vulnerability, which could be of catastrophic dimensions in a nuclear scenario.

In summary, the uncertainties regarding Israel's ability to establish stable deterrence and the technological uncertainties of a defensive system lead to the inescapable conclusion that Israel's security is best served by denying Iran a nuclear bomb. 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, which Washington decided to go along with for a while, is to provide incentives to Iran to cooperate on the nuclear issue. Yet, this policy, that cannot but be termed appeasement, has little chance of halting the progress of those components in the Iranian nuclear program that are significant in producing a bomb. 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, particularly since their nuclear program is viewed as the best insurance policy for the current leadership, and is probably the single most popular policy associated with this regime.

The US probably 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. Washington prefers to raise the issue of Iran at the UN Security Council in order to impose economic sanctions and eventually secure international legitimacy for military action against the nuclear installations.

While the US was successful in bringing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to recognize Iran's non-compliance with its treaty obligations (September 2005), the Board of Governors of the IAEA that met again in November 2005 postponed the referral of the Iranian case to the UN Security Council, in order to allow more time for negotiations. This postponement serves Iranian interests in gaining time as its strategy is one that can be termed "talk and build".

Even if the matter is brought to the UN and sanctions are imposed, the efficacy of such measures is doubtful. Economic sanctions rarely result in a change of policies. In this case, Islamic Iran seeks a nuclear bomb primarily to allow it to oppose a Pax Americana, and it is ready to pay a high price for its foreign policy orientation.

Indirect Pressure on Iran

The Iranian challenge could also be dealt with by adopting an "indirect strategy." This requires focusing on Lebanon -- the weakest link in the Iran-Syria-Lebanon nexus -- that harbors radical Shiite strategic challenges to the West in the form of terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

It is in the Lebanese arena that much of the future direction of Iranian foreign policy will be decided. Liberating Lebanon from Syria will in turn weaken the Damascus regime, possibly even leading even to its demise. This process will also weaken and isolate Tehran. An isolated Iran might be more susceptible to Western pressures. Lebanon is indeed the most vulnerable point for the rollback of the radical forces in the Middle East.

In accordance with the tenets of the indirect approach, the US can and should aim for regime change in Teheran. If Natan Sharansky is right in his recent book, *The Case for Democracy*, that human beings prefer to live in freedom than in fear, and that many of them are ready to take personal risks to realize their preferences, Iran could be ripe for removing the yoke of the mullahs.

Iran is more advanced than other Arab states according to almost every socio-economic criterion, and is therefore a better candidate for democratization. American diplomacy, aimed at strengthening the dissenting voices in Iran, might be successful in fostering an effect similar to the one that brought about the disintegration of the Soviet empire.

The indirect strategy is advantageous as it rests on regional and domestic dynamics, and minimizes Iranian antagonism towards the American activist approach. Yet, the fruition of such a strategy may take too much time. European procrastination and past diplomatic failures to delay the Iranian nuclear program may leave no other choice but the military option to prevent the worst-case scenario - a nuclear Islamic Republic of Iran.

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.

While it is probably true that intelligence services cannot provide military planners with an exact and comprehensive picture of the locations of all Iranian nuclear installations, what we know seems to be enough to allow the destruction of a large part of the country's nuclear program. Partial destruction would be enough to cripple Iran's ability to build a nuclear bomb 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 accordance with its new strategic doctrine. American public opinion can be enlisted to back a military strike on Iran, despite the difficulties faced by the administration with regard to its Iraq policy, if a clear-cut case is made that all other options have been exhausted in the quest to prevent a very dangerous development.

In fact, a clear 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. This is exactly what most of the states in the region expect. Nobody wants a nuclear Iran and most Mideastern rulers hope to see the hegemonic superpower take a resolute stand on the matter. Whatever the public reaction may surface in the region, in private everyone will clap and savor such an American demonstration of leadership and determination in obstructing the Iranian nuclear program.

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.

In my estimation, 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. Such Iranian behavior, before the state has acquired the bomb, might be deterred by a clear American commitment to use its military power to assure the security of the oil routes. Even without such a commitment, American inaction when confronted by Iranian attempts to block the Hormuz Straits is 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. The 'cost' issue is not really relevant for Israel, because it also will suffer the wrath of Iran if America bombs the Iranian installations.

Conclusion

A nuclear Iran is a serious threat to the Middle East. Moreover, a nuclear bomb in the hands of the mullahs may have far-reaching repercussions, far 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 spot. Diplomacy is 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.

If the US does not act in accordance with its international duties as a superpower, Israel will have to face the difficult choice of how to respond. Since June 1981, Israel's position has been that a military nuclear program implemented by a hostile state constitutes a *casus belli* warranting preemptive action. It remains to be seen whether Jerusalem will be forced to act in accordance with its strategic doctrine.

Resolute action against Iranian nuclear installations involves many risks, but inaction, it seems, will lead to far worse consequences.

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