

A Nuclear Iran: Avoiding a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

by Marc Finaud

Key Points

- *The rising tensions over the Iranian nuclear programme and the threat of military intervention against Tehran carry serious risks of regional and global conflagration while having the potential only of delaying marginally that programme.*
- *If it is true that letting Iran manufacture nuclear weapons would also have grave consequences, in particular in terms of further proliferation, the toughening of sanctions and the military option may only offer the Iranian regime the pretext for going precisely into that direction.*
- *The mix of political pressure, economic and financial sanctions and occasional negotiations followed until now by the international community has not been effective in producing the desired outcome.*
- *A new approach should depart from the obsession with the cessation of Iranian uranium enrichment and be based on multinational approaches of the nuclear fuel cycle, confidence-building measures, and mutual benefits.*
- *Moreover, this approach should move beyond the sole discussion of Iran's nuclear programme and be expanded to include other issues, such as the regional strategic environment, which influence Iran's threat perceptions and long-term planning. In particular, the most effective way of preventing Iran from acquiring the nuclear weapon will be its inclusion, along with Israel, into a regional zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).*

The world is watching, almost passively, the rising tensions between Iran and the West over Tehran's nuclear programme. Sabre-rattling now includes naval gesticulation in the Strait of Hormuz. Sanctions by the United States and the European Union have been toughened. With a US electoral context more propitious for rhetoric escalation than sober assessments, Israel keeps the military option on the table by invoking a potential "existential threat". Yet most cool-headed experts warn about the dire consequences of military confrontation in one of the world's most volatile regions:

- Limited effects of air strikes on the Iranian programme whose most sensitive components are concealed or well protected. The US Secretary of Defence admitted recently that even the most powerful American "bunker buster", weighing 15 tonnes, was insufficient to destroy Iran's fortified sites;¹
- Risks of retaliation against US interests, Israel, Gulf countries, or oil production/transit facilities;
- Severe disruption of the oil markets and an oil price increase that will benefit Iran;
- Likely rallying of the Iranian population around a regime currently opposed by a large majority; and

- The possible formation of an anti-Western coalition between now-divided Shiite and Sunni populations in the Muslim "street".

Such a short-sighted approach would, at best, delay the Iranian nuclear programme (some say for a year or two), at worst turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy: deliver on a silver plate what some quarters in the Islamic Republic have been dreaming of – the pretext for deciding to manufacture a nuclear weapon seen as the only ultimate protection of the country against foreign aggression.

Proponents of the military option argue that pre-emptive action is necessary before it is too late, and that the costs of such action, as high as they may be, would never exceed those resulting from letting Tehran acquire the bomb:

- Upsetting the regional balance of power especially when adding the Iranian ballistic missile arsenal into the equation;
- Setting in motion the domino theory of proliferation (with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey presumably following suit);
- Allowing blackmail on Gulf countries (especially those with Shiite populations) and the oil markets;

¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 Jan. 2012.

- Putting the deadliest weapon in the hands of a rogue state run by an irrational, unpredictable leadership.

This dilemma oversimplifies the issue. As President Sarkozy noted in his 2007 speech to the French Ambassadors, we must avoid the “catastrophic alternative: the Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran”. The suggested approach, actually followed by the international community since the beginning of the crisis in 2002, has consisted of a mix of political pressure (through resolutions of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN Security Council), economic and financial sanctions, and sporadic negotiations with Iran. During the past decade, not only did Iran consistently refuse to cease enriching uranium to produce nuclear fuel (officially for its civilian needs) but it took advantage of time, available oil revenue, and divisions within the international community to develop its production and master the technological challenges of nuclear capability. In other words, Iran defied the authority of the world’s most legitimate governing body, by-passed sanctions (which hurt the population more than the regime), and used negotiations to gain time and display apparent flexibility. The balance sheet does not speak much in favour of that approach. Is this a sufficient reason for shifting to the military option or should that approach be made more effective?

“Even the most recent IAEA report did not conclude that there was evidence of a formal decision of the Iranian leadership to manufacture a nuclear weapon”

Between the scenario of a military strike and the resignation to see Iran achieve weaponization, other intermediate options have been attempted. Although there is no official recognition, there are good reasons to believe that the United States and Israel (perhaps others?) are behind the cyber-attack known as the Stuxnet virus, which slowed down uranium enrichment, as well as extra-judicial killings of key Iranian scientists and the bombing of a military facility. This covert, remote warfare may have caused some damage to the Iranian programme, but it will never succeed in dramatically disrupting it. It also carries some risks, for instance in exposing Iranian agents or provoking reprisals by proxy terrorist groups.

How then can we overcome the current deadlock and avoid the “catastrophic alternative”? Decision-makers should listen to non-biased experts who advocate a fresh and imaginative approach based on the following considerations (without any hierarchical or sequential order).

Take into Account the Strategic Environment

Like for any other precedent of nuclear proliferation, one must avoid looking only at the outcome or the symptom, i.e. the manufacturing of a nuclear weapon, but grasp the global picture and the motivations, including threat perceptions. In the case of Iran, after the 1979 Revolution, the leadership’s attitude on the Iranian nuclear programme was influenced by several factors:

- The resentment against the West for having supported the Shah;
- The experience of the refusal by the United States, France, Germany, and Argentina to pursue cooperation and supply nuclear fuel;

- Iraqi air strikes against the Bushehr reactor during the Iran-Iraq war between 1984 and 1987;
- The George W. Bush administration’s official policy of regime change (Iran being placed in the “Axis of Evil”);
- The double standard of the West tolerating Israel’s nuclear capacity;
- The strategic situation of Iran, surrounded by US bases and forces after the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the massive US military support to Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or the UAE;
- The example of North Korea, which achieved some recognition and a pledge of non-aggression by the United States as well as economic assistance only after having exploded nuclear devices in 2006 and 2009;
- Perhaps most of all, the counter-examples of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, which was invaded by a US-led coalition while its nuclear military programme had been previously stopped by the UN, and Gaddafi’s Libya, which was also submitted to military intervention after having abandoned its WMD programmes.

Thus, it would not be surprising if the regime had wanted to secure some sort of ultimate insurance policy against foreign intervention and a means of being taken seriously by the great powers. No one can really believe that Iran will unilaterally abandon such a lever without credible and tangible assurances. In that sense, there is a great deal of similarity between the Iranian and the Israeli perceptions, with the difference that the Israeli nuclear arsenal is already a current reality.



Iran and US military presence (Source: Energy & Capital)

Do Not Push Iran into Crossing the Threshold

The 2004 IAEA report talks of a “pattern of concealment” in describing the breaches by Iran of its Safeguards Agreement with the Agency.² More accusations have been formulated in the subsequent reports which fuel suspicions about the “military dimensions” of the Iranian nuclear programme. Iran has made several awkward attempts to respond to such accusations, but not convincingly. However, even the most recent IAEA report,³ considered as the most

² IAEA, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in Iran”, Doc. GOV/2004/83, 15 Nov. 2004.

³ IAEA, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in Iran”, Doc. GOV/2011/65, 8 Nov. 2011.

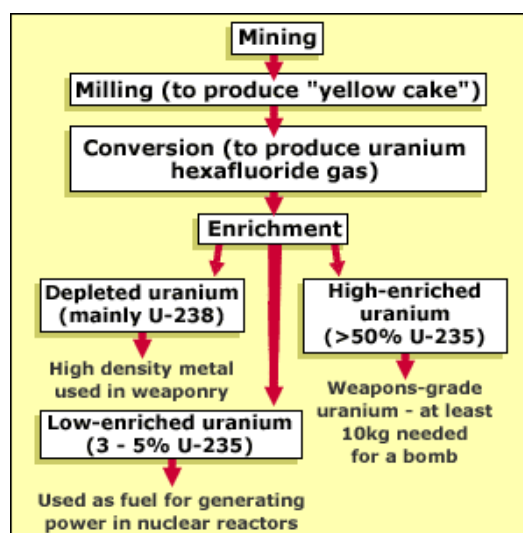
straightforward albeit in a controversial way, did not conclude that there was evidence of a formal decision of the Iranian leadership to manufacture a nuclear weapon. For Tehran, the most difficult approach to explain is the decision to launch a massive uranium enrichment programme meant to produce nuclear fuel without even having started the construction of the nuclear power plants to use that fuel. Indeed, the fuel needed for the Russian-made Bushehr plant is supplied and reprocessed by Russia. This tends to substantiate the assertion that Iran did not intend to acquire a sufficient quantity of low-enriched uranium to shift to weapons grade material, but rather the technology and the know-how to do so if required. The crux of the matter is precisely not to give Iran an excuse for applying that technology and crossing the nuclear threshold.

Move Beyond Obsession with the Cessation of Uranium Enrichment

Until now, precisely because of the above risk, the international community has insisted on a full cessation of uranium enrichment by Iran while the Iranian leaders have consistently excluded such a move, invoking the “inalienable right” to enrichment as enshrined, in their view, in Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). That right actually relates to the “peaceful uses of nuclear energy” and is dependent upon compliance with non-proliferation obligations, including the Safeguards Agreement. No other NPT State Party involved in uranium enrichment and not possessing nuclear weapons, i.e. Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands – soon to be joined by Brazil –, has been found in breach of its Safeguards Agreement. So it is not so much the issue of enrichment *per se* which creates a problem, but what Iran will use enriched uranium for. Low-enriched uranium (up to 3-5 percent) can only be used in power generating plants while the manufacture of a nuclear warhead requires 90-percent-enriched uranium. This is why the international community should have concentrated its efforts on ensuring that the low-enriched uranium produced by Iran was stored for later civilian use under adequate international controls, and that the 20-percent enriched uranium designed for its 5-megawatt research reactor was not further enriched and diverted to military use.

International efforts to promote multinational approaches to the nuclear fuel cycle and assurances of supply are not new. They include: the IAEA study project on Regional Nuclear Fuel Cycle Centres (RNFC) from 1975 to 1977; the Committee on International Plutonium Storage (IPS) from 1978 to 1982; the International Fuel Cycle Evaluation Programme (INFCE) from 1977 to 1980; the United Nations Conference for the Promotion of International Co-operation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy (UNPICPUNE) in 1987; the Committee on Assurances of Supply (CAS) from 1980 to 1987; and the Report of the Independent Expert Group on Multilateral Approaches to the Nuclear Fuel Cycle⁴ in 2005. After several donor countries pledged some USD 144 million, the IAEA established a multilateral low-enriched fuel

bank in Russia in 2010.⁵ Iran called that particular initiative “nuclear apartheid” and defended national production of nuclear fuel as “unquestionable”. But what has never been discussed with Iran is the possibility of indigenous enrichment under a multinational scheme and under strict IAEA supervision. Yet Iran had declared itself in favour of a nuclear fuel bank in which it would be a stakeholder, or domestic enrichment as part of an international consortium. In addition, the May 2012 “swap deal” that was negotiated by Brazil and Turkey (under which low-enriched uranium will be shipped from Iran to Russia and France for enriching up to 20 percent) should be updated to take account of the Iranian production since then, and implemented with the support of the IAEA.



The Uranium Enrichment Process (Source: BBC News)

Negotiate Mutual Concessions and Confidence-Building Measures

In an attempt to negotiate a peaceful solution to the crisis, the EU3 (France, Germany, United Kingdom) expanded later to form the “G5+1” (with China, Russia, and the United States) have put forward in 2009 the idea of exchanging a freeze of enrichment against a freeze of sanctions. That idea was further developed in 2010 by Russia, which proposed a series of mutual confidence-building measures, including a freeze on the expansion of Iran’s enrichment programme limited to 5 percent, and a gradual lifting of the sanctions.

“This issue of Iran’s nuclear programme will never be solved in a satisfactory and sustainable way independently of a regional approach to security”

Considering the history of distrust and tensions between Iran and the West, no other solution than one based on mutual concessions and assurances is realistic. However, the current escalation on sanctions adopted by the United States and the European Union regarding financial transfers to the Iranian Central Bank and oil exports is not the most effective way of achieving that mutual confidence and may even make the military option inevitable. Clearly, because any solution to the crisis will be achieved only through negotiations, reverting to the EU-Russian approach with the necessary commitments and guarantees on both “sides” is called for. Of course, there may still be uncertainties

4 IAEA, “Multilateral Approaches to the Nuclear Fuel Cycle: Expert Group Report Submitted to the Director General of the IAEA”, Doc. IN-FCIRC/640, 22 Feb. 2005.

5 IAEA, “IAEA, Russia Inaugurates World’s First Low Enriched Uranium Reserve”, 17 Dec. 2010.

about announcements and decisions made by the Iranian regime because of the lasting internal power struggles between the various constituencies or establishments (such as the Revolutionary Guard, the regular armed forces, the Supreme Leader, President Ahmadinejad, etc.). But there is no doubt that toughening sanctions and threatening Iran with military action will only strengthen the hardliners and marginalize those who favour a negotiated peaceful outcome.

Insert the Iranian Nuclear Programme into a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon Free Zone

In past negotiations, Iran's proposals have included discussions on issues other than its nuclear programme, in a manner consistent with the "broad picture" approach outlined above. In particular, Iran has raised the issue of "universalization of the NPT" (meaning Israeli nuclear capability) and WMD in the region. Momentum is now mounting to finally address the project of a zone free of nuclear weapons and other WMD in the Middle East, with the prospect of an international conference agreed upon by the NPT States to be held in Helsinki before the end of 2012. This project, long advocated by Iran and Egypt, offers a real chance of ensuring that Iran will never become a Nuclear-Weapon State. This is why it is strongly supported by countries that share the fear of a nuclear-armed Iran, such as Saudi Arabia. Its Prince Turki Al-Faisal made this clear in recent statements, and warned that failure to

achieve that goal could open a Pandora's Box, including Saudi Arabia's decision to follow suit.⁶ In other words, the issue of Iran's nuclear programme will never be solved in a satisfactory and sustainable way independently of a regional approach to security. This means that the sooner a process is launched to negotiate all the aspects of the zone project, including Israel's capacities in WMD, the sooner Iran will be encouraged to relinquish its quest for mastering nuclear military technology. Indeed, achieving such a zone free of all WMD will not be a quick and easy process. It will have to include credible verification mechanisms, confidence-building measures, controls over potentially destabilizing conventional build-ups, assurances from the existing nuclear powers, and some permanent collective security architecture. If Israel makes peace with the Palestinians and the Arabs, it will not need to cling to its WMD capacity. Ultimately this will mean peace and mutual recognition among all the states of the region. It is precisely because the goal is ambitious, – some even say utopian to avoid its pursuit –, that an early start of negotiations is necessary. The outcome of those talks can only be a "win-win" solution and not the "zero-sum game" that is being sought at the moment.

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⁶ E. Lederer, "Mideast Nuke Race Feared", *Arabnews.com*, 27 Jan. 2012.

4 NB: This paper is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official view of the GCSP or of the French Government.

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