

April 2007

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME AND REGIONAL SECURITY

Dr. Farhang Jahanpour

The following is an edited version of a talk given by Farhang Jahanpour on 16 March 2007 at a joint Oxford Research Group (ORG) – Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) conference on “How might a UK decision to replace Trident affect key current proliferation concerns? Regional and global perspectives”.

Rear Admiral Richard Cobbold, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

This week two important nuclear-related decisions were taken, one nationally and the other internationally. Two days ago (14 March 2007) the British Parliament voted by a wide margin to replace Trident at a cost of anything between £20-70 billion pounds. At the same time, the permanent five at the UN Security Council have apparently reached agreement to impose tougher sanctions on Iran for her decision to continue small-scale enrichment of uranium for what she claims is peaceful purposes.

In the past century, which has been the most deadly century in man's long history on earth, two devastating World Wars, fought mainly among developed, civilised Western countries, resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of innocent people, but although many countries were totally devastated humanity survived. However, the end of the Second World War witnessed the use of a new category of weapons by the United States that could potentially end human civilisation, as we know it. Grottesquely called 'Little Boy', the bomb that flattened Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, was a uranium bomb and resulted in between 70,000-130,000 immediate deaths, and many thousands later. 'Fat Man' that blasted Nagasaki three days later was a plutonium bomb, and resulted in 45,000 immediate deaths. Since then, advances in nuclear weapons have made those two bombs look like mere toys by comparison.

Mercifully, so far the world has been saved from the scourge of a nuclear exchange, although at least on a few occasions the world has come close to Armageddon. During the siege of Berlin, the Cuban missile crisis, the Yom Kipur War, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and a possible threat to the oil deposits in the Persian Gulf fingers began to quiver on the nuclear button. There was a serious risk of a miscalculation and implied threat to use nuclear weapons. However, at the height of the Cold War the terrible concept of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) prevented the two superpowers from going over the brink and committing mutual suicide.

Sadly, since the end of the Cold War, a false sense of security has numbed public consciousness and the proliferation, modernisation and upgrading of these ghastly weapons have not aroused appropriate levels of fear and apprehension among the public and the politicians. The relative lack of public interest in the parliamentary debate over the renewal of Trident was best represented by the fact that only one

Farhang Jahanpour, a British national of Iranian origin, is a former Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Languages at the University of Isfahan, a former Senior Fulbright Research Scholar at Harvard University, and a part-time tutor in the Department of Continuing Education at the University of Oxford, where he teaches courses on politics and religion in the Middle East. Dr. Jahanpour also spent 18 years at the BBC Monitoring Service covering the news from Iran, the Middle East and North Africa.

leading newspaper covered the parliamentary vote on its front page. The proliferation of nuclear weapons is very dangerous, and the possible use of nuclear weapons in future conflicts has not been eliminated. Indeed the possibility of the use of tactical nuclear weapons has made the situation even more acute.

Some Key NPT Articles

The fear of the proliferation of nuclear weapons led to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was signed in London, Washington and Moscow on 1 July 1968, and was ratified by most countries and came into force on 5 March 1970.¹ It has been one of the most successful military agreements ever signed. It has more States Parties than any other arms control or disarmament treaty, and it has been the most widely adhered to in the area of arms control, except by nuclear powers. Only four countries are not parties to this treaty – India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea – and all have developed nuclear arsenals.

What is important about the NPT is that it is not a one-way street. It does not simply call on the non-nuclear countries to refrain from developing nuclear weapons, to the detriment of their national security, but it equally calls on nuclear powers to get rid of their nuclear arsenals and move towards a world free of nuclear weapons. The agreement starts with the sentence, “Considering the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples...”

It is important to review some of the key articles of the Treaty:

- Article 1 of the NPT states that Nuclear Weapon State Countries (N5) [US, Russia, China, UK and France] should not transfer any weapon-related technology to others.
- Article 2 states the other side of the coin, namely others should not acquire any form of nuclear weapons technology from the countries that possess them or acquire them independently.
- Article 4 not only allows the use of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes but even declares that it is “the Inalienable right” of every country to do research, development and production, and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, without discrimination as long as Articles 1 and 2 are satisfied. It further states that all parties can exchange equipment, material, and science and technology for peaceful purposes.
- Article 6 makes it obligatory for the nuclear states to get rid of their nuclear weapons. The Treaty states that all countries should pursue negotiations on measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race and “achieving nuclear disarmament”.

While nuclear powers have worked hard to prevent other countries from acquiring nuclear weapons, they have not abided by their side of the bargain and have been reluctant to give up their nuclear weapons. On the contrary, they have further developed and upgraded those weapons, and have made them more capable of use on battlefields. Sadly, 37 years after its final ratification, the number of nuclear-armed countries has increased and at least four other countries have joined the club.

Some NPT Violations

Apart from the provisions of the NPT that call on all countries to get rid of nuclear weapons, there have been a number of other rulings that have reinforced those requirements:

- a) The 1996 International Court of Justice advisory opinion states, “There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.” Nuclear powers have ignored that opinion.

- b) The United States has further violated the Treaty by her plans to develop the 'Reliable Replacement Warhead', a new type of nuclear warhead to extend the viability of her nuclear arsenal.² The United States and possibly Russia are also developing tactical nuclear warheads with lower yields.
- c) Since Article 6 of the NPT defines Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) as those that had manufactured and tested a nuclear device prior to 1 January 1967, it is not possible for India, Pakistan, Israel or North Korea to be regarded as nuclear weapon states as they have tried to so be. All those countries are in violation of the NPT, and providing them assistance in nuclear fields, such as the US agreement with India to supply her with nuclear reactors and advanced nuclear technology, have constituted violations of the Treaty. The same applies to military cooperation with Israel and Pakistan.
- d) Paragraph 14 of the binding UN Security Council Resolution 687 that called for the disarmament of Iraq, also specified the establishment in the Middle East of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction.³ It was clearly understood by all the countries that joined the US-led coalition to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait that after the elimination of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Israel would be required to get rid of her nuclear arsenal. Israel – and by extension the countries that have not implemented that paragraph – have violated that binding Resolution. Indeed, both the United States and Israel are believed to maintain nuclear weapons in the region.
- e) The 1995 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review and Extension Conference also called for “the early establishment by regional parties of a Middle East zone free of nuclear and all other weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems”.⁴ The United States, Great Britain and the international community have ignored these resolutions by not pressing Israel to give up her nuclear weapons.
- f) The 2000 NPT Review Conference called for “Cuba, India, Israel and Pakistan to accede to the Treaty as NNWS promptly and without condition”.⁵ States Parties also agreed to “make determined efforts” to achieve universality. Since 2000, little effort has been made to encourage India, Pakistan or Israel to accede as Non-nuclear Weapon States (NNWS).
- g) While during the Cold War, NATO refused to rule out first use of nuclear weapons due to the proximity of Soviet forces, this policy has not been revised since the end of the Cold War and there is no undertaking not to use nuclear weapons even against non-nuclear states. There have been repeated, credible reports that the Pentagon is considering the use of nuclear bunker-buster weapons to destroy Iran’s nuclear sites.⁶
- h) In the light of all this, the British government’s decision to replace its nuclear weapons has been most regrettable, as it sends the wrong message to the world and undermines the NPT. While a unilateral decision to disarm might not have had much effect upon the rest of the world, a serious effort to use the existing British nuclear weapons to negotiate an end to their possession by other countries could have constituted a major step forward.
- i) For the past two thousand years and more, mankind has tried to define the requirements of a just war. During the past few decades, some of these principles have been enshrined in legally binding international agreements and conventions. They include the Covenant of the League of Nations after World War I, the Pact of Paris of 1928, and the Charter of the United Nations. A few ideas are common to all these definitions, namely that any military action should be based on self-defence, be in compliance with international law, must be proportionate, must be the last resort, and must not target civilians and non-combatants. Other ideas flow from these: the emphasis on arbitration and the renunciation of first resort to force in the settlement of disputes, and the principle of collective self-defence. It is difficult to see how nuclear weapons could be compatible with any of these requirements.

Various Options in Dealing with Iran

Now coming to the case of Iran's possible acquisition of nuclear weapons, the US intelligence community at least has been consistent, but in a manner far from reassuring. In 1995 it started saying – every year – that Iran was “within five years” of reaching a nuclear weapons capability. In a subsequent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the forecast basically was moved out to 10 years. The US National Intelligence Estimate released in summer 2005 estimates that if Iran did have an active nuclear weapons programme, and if the international atmosphere were favourable to it being able to get hold of the requisite equipment, it would still be a good 10 years away from a bomb. But the international atmosphere is actively hostile to such a development, and anyway it has not been proved that there is such a weapons programme.

The new US Director of National Intelligence, Michael McConnell, at a Senate Armed Forces Committee hearing on 27 February 2007 repeated the earlier assessment of his predecessor, John Negroponte, about a possible date for Iran's possession of nuclear weapons. He said, “We assess that Iran could develop a nuclear weapon early-to-mid-next decade.”⁷ This provides a compromise between the five and the ten-year forecasts. However, as Joseph Cirincione, the Director for Nonproliferation at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has pointed out, “Even that estimate, shared by the US Defense Intelligence Agency and experts at IISS, ISIS, and University of Maryland assumes Iran goes full-speed ahead and does not encounter any of the technical problems that typically plague such programs.”⁸

Nevertheless, the West, and particularly the United States and Israel, have been against allowing Iran even to enrich uranium, which is her ‘inalienable right’ according to the NPT. Iran's file was eventually sent to the UN Security Council, which issued a resolution at the end of July 2006 giving Iran two months' deadline to suspend her uranium enrichment. As Iran ignored that resolution, on 23 December 2006, the Security Council issued Resolution 1737, imposing limited sanctions on Iran. The present tension between Iran and the United States and Iran and Israel poses the greatest risk to international security, and rather than sleepwalking towards a disaster of major proportions, the time has come to find a solution to this problem.

The main question is what to do to overcome this impasse.

The first option is to do nothing. After all, the Middle East has lived with the danger of Israel's possession of nuclear weapons for the past 40 years. Given the massive superiority of US forces in the region and Israel's devastating retaliation to any possible Iranian use of force, even if she ever acquired nuclear weapons there would be no possibility of Iran wishing to commit suicide. If Iran ever acquired nuclear weapons, they would be mainly regarded as a deterrent, rather than for any aggressive intention. It could be argued that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons could create a military balance and greater stability in the Middle East, in the same way that the possession of nuclear weapons by both India and Pakistan prevented them from going to war when hundreds of thousands of troops from both sides were mobilised for action a few years ago. However, given the present international climate and the desire to maintain Israel's nuclear monopoly and military superiority over all Middle Eastern states, it is unlikely that the United States and Israel would leave Iran alone, as we have seen in the case of repeated Security Council resolutions.

The second option that is repeatedly talked about is resort to military action. President Bush has repeatedly stressed that “all options are on the table”. Under the present circumstances when US forces are bogged down in Iraq a large-scale invasion of Iran aimed at regime change is not feasible. However, the United States has recently reinforced its options of launching a military attack on Iran. It is important to bear in mind that a military attack would have the following characteristics:

- a) No military attack can be limited to hitting just some suspected sites. According to some reports, the Pentagon has already drawn up contingency plans for attacking up to 2,000 major targets, which in

addition to nuclear processing and enrichment sites would include missile sites, anti-aircraft sites, Revolutionary Guard headquarters, sea defences, military barracks, command and control centres, etc. This would involve thousands of sorties and cruise missiles over many days and would clearly entail tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of deaths.

- b) The military attack would not be short-lived. Even the first attack would result in a long war, because Iran is bound to retaliate and it would be foolish to imagine that a massive military attack would cow them and bring them to their knees.
- c) A military confrontation would result in asymmetric warfare, as Iran would try to retaliate in the best way that it could in order to inflict the maximum pain on the invader. Iran's supreme leader has said that any attack on Iran would result in an all-out war, which would threaten Western interests both regionally and internationally.
- d) A military attack would unite the Iranian nation – even the opponents of the regime – and far from resulting in the collapse of the regime would consolidate its position. Assuming that even 20% of the population fanatically supports the regime it would mean some 15 million people, out of Iran's 74 million population, would make the dreadful Iraqi situation look like a cakewalk.
- e) Such a war would have major regional repercussions. It would seriously endanger the position of US forces in the region, and would further endanger the security of Israel, the Persian Gulf states and beyond.
- f) It would not take a great deal for Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz and to disrupt the flow of oil, not only from Iran but from the region as a whole, which would drive the price of oil sky high.
- g) It could result in greater anger against the West and could destabilise many countries in the region that are friendly to the West.
- h) There will be absolutely no guarantee that even a massive attack could destroy all of Iran's nuclear sites. On the contrary, it could make Iran leave the NPT and then drive at full speed towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons, which she is not able to do at present because of constant IAEA inspections.
- i) These are some of the predictable consequences, but the unpredictable consequences could be even more serious. The British military historian Corelli Barnett believes that "an attack on Iran would effectively launch world war three".

Therefore, a military solution to the conflict should be avoided at all costs. Repeating the mantra of "all options are on the table", apart from being arrogant and insulting, could be counter-productive and dangerous. The disasters in Iraq and the devastating Israeli invasion of Lebanon last July and August (the fifth since 1978) have proved the limits to the use of force, which should be categorically ruled out.

The third option is to continue with a situation of no war, no peace, a kind of Cold War between Iran and the West. Apart from the fact that it will preclude options for more positive interaction between Iran and the West, a continued tense situation, with greater and greater sanctions on Iran and more militant responses from Iran could ultimately result in military action. As the result of an unintended incident, we might get the outcome that we all hope to avoid. Over ten years of comprehensive sanctions on Iraq, despite inflicting massive hardship and death on millions of Iraqis, did not force the very unpopular regime of Saddam Hussein to fall, and ultimately it resulted in a disastrous war.

Resolving the Dispute with Iran

The fourth option is to negotiate with Iran. Negotiation does not mean giving the other side ultimatums and preconditions. The US precondition that she will not talk to Iran unless she gives up uranium enrichment in advance is like putting the cart before the horse. Having access to nuclear enrichment is Iran's main card. What would be her incentive for giving up her ultimate card even before starting the negotiation?

Despite those earlier demands, US and Iranian representatives talked face-to-face last weekend on Iraq, which both sides described as constructive. The scope of those talks should be extended and all matters of mutual interest should be discussed. The United States has a number of major concerns about Iran. In addition to the nuclear issue, they fall under the three broad categories of meddling in Iraq, supporting terrorism by providing assistance to Hezbollah and Hamas, and thirdly impeding the "Arab-Israeli peace process".

For her part, Iran has a number of grievances concerning the United States. After remaining neutral and even providing assistance after the first Gulf War, completely out of the blue the US put forward its 'dual containment policy', trying to contain both Iran and Iraq, and later the US Congress passed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act. After the US invasion of Afghanistan, Iran provided a great deal of help by persuading the members of the Northern Alliance to take part in the Bonn talks. Nevertheless, shortly afterwards, President Bush in a State of the Union address linked Iran with Iraq and North Korea as a member of the 'Axis of Evil'. The United States continues to block some of Iran's assets and recently she imposed further sanctions on Iran. Above all, Iran wishes to have a guarantee of security and non-interference in her domestic affairs, which was promised by the 1981 Algiers Accords between Iran and the United States.

In an atmosphere of goodwill and constructive dialogue all these mutual concerns can be addressed. Iran can help stabilise the situation in Iraq, play a constructive role in Lebanon and in the Arab-Israeli peace talks and help with the Persian Gulf security. Iran has the legitimate right to be recognised as a major player in the Middle East, rather than being isolated and frozen out of Middle East developments. Iran must accept the United States' interests in the Middle East, and reciprocally the United States should respect Iran's historic role in the region.

In order to resolve the nuclear crisis, it is possible to find some face-saving formulas in keeping with the NPT provisions, as follows:

- a) Dr. ElBaradei's proposal for "time-out" seems very sensible. It calls for Iran agreeing to suspend once again her enrichment programme for the duration of the talks with the West, in return for the suspension of Security Council resolutions. This will be necessary to build confidence and to show goodwill towards a peaceful resolution of the dispute.
- b) As a part of a final agreement, Iran should be allowed uranium enrichment but under strict supervision. In order to ensure transparency, the West can form a consortium with the participation of Russia, the EU-3 and maybe the United States and Iran in a joint enrichment programme that would bring Iran's activities under constant supervision.
- c) In return for Iran's agreement to give up any possible ambition to possess nuclear weapons, the United States and the West should offer Iran real and serious incentives, such as the lifting of the sanctions and bringing to an end Iran's diplomatic isolation.

- d) Also in return for Iran's renunciation of nuclear weapons, there should be a serious effort to get rid of Israel's nuclear weapons in keeping with UN resolutions, and a clear timetable should be set up in order to establish a nuclear free zone in the Middle East.
- e) In order to ensure that all countries that are engaged in peaceful nuclear activities have access to nuclear fuel, a nuclear fuel bank should be set up under the supervision of the IAEA, with no right of veto for any country to interrupt the supply of fuel.
- f) The international community should devote much greater attention to universal nuclear disarmament, and guarantees of no-first use of nuclear weapons, especially against non-nuclear states.

Regional Dimensions of the Dispute

It should be borne in mind that Iran's nuclear programme is only the tip of the iceberg and is closely linked with a large number of regional issues. The best way to achieve regional security goals would be to try to integrate Iran into two existing alliances. Shortly after the Iranian revolution, with Western encouragement six Persian Gulf countries formed the Gulf Co-operation Council (the GCC). There is no reason why that alliance cannot now include Iran and Iraq as well. This would link all the Persian Gulf littoral states in an alliance for regional security, so that instead of threatening one another they can all work together, with Western assistance, to ensure security in that vital part of the world.

The next step that can be taken to integrate Iran into the region and increase economic co-operation in the region is to activate the Economic Cooperation Council (ECO), which consists of Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries. The strengthening of that economic organisation would not only help bind Iran into the region and to the West, it could also bring Pakistan closer to the fold, and could provide economic assistance to Afghanistan and the Central Asian states.

With a little constructive imagination and genuine dialogue it is possible to resolve all the problems of the region, instead of plunging the region into another disastrous war.

In one of his last reports to the General Assembly, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said dialogue "may be a soft tool of diplomacy, but in the long term, it can prevail. Without this dialogue taking place every day among all nations – within and between civilizations, cultures and groups – no peace can be lasting and no prosperity can be secure".

The UN chief said the program had taken on new meaning following the 11 September suicide attacks. "A dialogue among civilizations is not only a necessary answer to terrorism – it is in many ways its nemesis. Where terrorism seeks to divide humanity, the dialogue aims to unite us," he said.

Notes and References

¹ For the text of the NPT and related documents, see <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/npt/>.

² For a Congressional report on 'Reliable Replacement Warhead' programme, see <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL32929.pdf>.

³ For Resolution 687, see <http://www.fas.org/news/un/iraq/sres/sres0687.htm>.

⁴ See <http://disarmament.un.org/wmd/npt/1995RESME.htm>.

⁵ See <http://disarmament2.un.org/wmd/npt/2000FD.pdf>.

⁶ Seymour Hersh, "The Iran Plans", *The New Yorker* (27 November 2006).

⁷ Ray McGovern, "Iran's Very Bad N-Word", *TomPaine.com* (28 February 2007), see <http://www.commondreams.org/views07/0228-23.htm>.

⁸ Joseph Cirincione, *No Military Options* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 January 2006), see <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/npp/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17922>.

www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk