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A Nuclear-Armed Iran

Possible Security and Diplomatic Implications

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"Whoever controls the Middle East controls the world's energy and wealth . . . whoever dominates the Middle East can rule the entire world, too."

—Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, January 31, 2010

Starting in the 1970s, Iran developed a deep interest in nuclear power, which it steadfastly maintained was exclusively for peaceful purposes. It joined the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT), where it was a member in good standing, allowed international safeguards and inspections from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and entered into commercial contracts for civilian technologies. Some observers acknowledged the prospect of Iran aspiring to become a nuclear weapons state, but it was seen as a distant possibility whose outline could only be vaguely glimpsed far on the horizon.

During the last decade, however, Iran's ambitions have come into sharper focus. It became increasingly clear that Iran was interested in mastering the full fuel cycle—especially uranium enrichment—and, moreover, had taken impressive steps to realize this ambition. Some voices remained in denial, claiming that Iran would never build the bomb. Others maintained that Iran could never be allowed to acquire a nuclear arsenal—that such an outcome was "unacceptable." They warned that a nuclear-armed Tehran would trigger a proliferation chain reaction in the region, perhaps fatally undermine the NPT and nonproliferation regime, threaten neighboring countries, embolden radical forces across the Middle East, and disrupt the stability of the global oil market. During the 2007–2008 presidential campaign, all the major candidates went on the record to this end, even suggesting that the United States would use military force if necessary ("all options are on the table"). President Obama repeated this formula less than ten days after taking office.

However, in the past year or so, more voices have been arguing that "well, maybe we can cope with a nuclear-armed Iran after all." James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh make this argument in the March/April issue of *Foreign Affairs,* in their article "After Iran Gets the Bomb: How Washington Can Limit the Damage from Iran's Nuclear Defiance." It is unclear whether this line of thinking constitutes prudent planning, or reflects greater "realism," or appreciates that sanctions and other policies short of war will not effectively deter Iran's nuclear ambitions, or recognizes that a military strike has priced itself out of the market, or whether it is simply a case of the United States unilaterally defining success downwards. Perhaps it is some combination of all the above. What is clear is that the formerly "unacceptable" has become acceptable for more people than before, both inside and outside the government. In a few more years, it may even become conventional wisdom.

The instructions for this paper were to accept this premise and to not fight the scenario of an Iran with nuclear weapons. It avoids repeat the arguments used in the two previous, excellent papers by Frederick Kagan and Kenneth M. Pollack. Instead, it addresses the likely consequences for the region of an Iran with nuclear weapons. In broad terms, there are three options. Expressed in academic jargon, they are:

- *Self-help*: in which some of Iran's neighbors decide that they cannot place their country at the mercy of Iran's mullahs and cannot place their trust in the United States or the collective will of putative security partners, and so decide to enhance their own defense by improving their conventional weapons capabilities or acquiring their own nuclear arsenals.

- *Bandwagoning*: in which Iran's neighbors (with the exception of Israel) move to tailor their domestic and foreign policies to accommodate Tehran's preferences.

- *Balancing*: in which Iran's neighbors (including Israel) move closer to the United States or form some type of collective security arrangement (perhaps with the United States as a member) as a way to resist and counter the increase in Iranian power.

Self-Help

This scenario has received the most attention from scholars and policymakers. The fear that some states in the region would move toward acquiring nuclear weapons tends to, first, overlook the relative ease and attractiveness of enhancing conventional military capabilities and, second, minimizes the not insignificant hurdles that these states would have to surmount to build a nuclear arsenal.

The premise behind placing greater reliance on conventional capabilities is that Iran would be largely unable to use its nuclear weapons for coercive purposes. One lesson from the Cold War is that nuclear weapons are most credible for defending national territory and extremists. This role for nuclear weapons is unlikely to be different in Iran's case. Indeed, it is expected that Iranian leaders would announce their new nuclear status by also trumpeting that the Islamic Republic—and the revolution—is now safeguarded from external threats.

The risk is not so much that Iran would actually employ or threaten to employ nuclear weapons offensively against neighboring states, but rather that it would be emboldened by their possession to use its conventional forces aggressively against neighboring states. In this case, enhanced conventional capabilities by countries in the region would be useful to deter and, if necessary, repel an Iranian attack. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Iraq would therefore be expected to purchase greater conventional military capabilities.

In fact, the GCC states have already begun to do so. The Obama administration has been working closely with Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states to expedite arms sales and upgrade defensive systems, especially for the protection of oil fields. It is expected that this trend will continue and even intensify.

Given the enormous disparity in forces (especially in manpower and missiles) between any of the GCC states and Iran, however, some GCC states may be uncomfortable relying solely on even enhanced conventional forces. Nuclear weapons, on the other hand, would be the ultimate force multiplier and would create a mutual balance of terror with Iran.

As superficially attractive as this option may appear, it seems unlikely that there will be an automatic, headlong push for independent nuclear weapons programs. There will be no crash programs. There will be no rush for the exits, *sauve qui peut*.

One reason is that the indigenous acquisition of nuclear weapons is a long process. (It is also expensive, but for the GCC states, expense would not be an issue. For Egypt and Jordan it would be.)

There is no gainsaying the amount of time it would take to acquire the human capital and technical capability to build nuclear weapons. It is not as easy in practice as it may look on paper. Proliferation

is not a light switch that can be automatically flipped; it is the steady movement along a continuum of capabilities. A state may decide to pursue a clandestine, dedicated nuclear weapons program or build a civilian nuclear capability and only later decide whether to build nuclear weapons. Either way, it means many years of heightened external scrutiny and vulnerability to economic sanctions, and military strikes by more powerful states.

There is another factor that will also influence proliferation in the region: the "enemy gets a vote." Iran's behavior as a nuclear weapons state may be crucial to shaping the nuclear decision-making of its neighbors.

For example, would countries in the region act differently if Iran deliberately kept its nuclear arsenal small? If it outlined a nuclear doctrine that explained that these weapons were for defensive purposes only? If its leaders spoke only of "minimum deterrence" to "protect the revolution"? (If Tehran translated Pierre Gallois into Farsi?) If it decided not to deploy any operational nuclear weapons and went to some lengths to signal that fact? What if it decided not to test any nuclear devices at all? After all, a program that used enriched uranium may not need to test nuclear devices to have confidence they would work, especially if Tehran had already received blueprints and technical assistance from other countries such as Pakistan, South Africa and Russia. And without a test, how worried would other states (Israel excepted) really be? Even if Washington considered Iran to be nuclear armed, would the region take the word of a United States that had been wrong on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs?

To turn from the general to the specific, the nonproliferation literature identifies three countries as being most worthy of concern: Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

Turkey possesses the industrial infrastructure and technical and scientific base to build its own nuclear weapons, given enough time. But Turkey is already a member of an alliance, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which has the potential to provide more security collectively than anything Ankara could muster on its own. The key question would then turn on trust or credibility—could Turkey rely on NATO to deter a nuclear-armed Iran and come to its defense if deterrence fails?

There are both declaratory and substantive steps that NATO could take to reassure Ankara. For example, NATO could use its declaratory policy to emphasize the alliance's firm commitment to Turkey's defense. It is also possible that Turkey may request that NATO station nuclear weapons on its territory as added confirmation of this commitment. (There is historical precedent here.) Undoubtedly, there are other ways of reassuring Turkey as well.

By virtue of its size and history in the Arab world, Egypt is often mentioned as a possible proliferator and has been since the 1960s. Yet does anyone think that Israel would tolerate a nuclear-armed Egypt or even an Egypt that was inclining in that direction? Knowing that, would Cairo even try to go this route? After all, Israel has already struck preemptively twice in the past few decades to prevent neighbors from acquiring nuclear capabilities. There is no reason to expect that it would be willing to give Egypt a pass, and no reason that Egypt would not already know that.

That leaves Saudi Arabia, which in some ways is the most interesting potential proliferator in the wake of a nuclear-armed Iran. Saudi Arabia faces the same challenges of a long R&D lead time and the threat of an Israeli preemptive strike as Egypt. But few observers have ever thought that Riyadh was interested in or capable of indigenously developing nuclear weapons. It would be far easier for Saudi Arabia to rely on Pakistan.

At first (or even second) glance, this scenario seems plausible given religious affinities and shared strategic interests. Pakistan has the goods, Saudi Arabia has the funds. There have been rumors and

reports for years that the two countries have a secret nuclear pact whereby Pakistan will transfer nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia at Riyadh's request. This agreement may exist.(This might best be characterized as a case of "just in time" proliferation.)

But how plausible, really, is this scenario? From Islamabad's perspective, it is already operating under the weight of the damage that A.Q. Khan inflicted on the nonproliferation regime and so may be reluctant to be the first country in history to sell nuclear weapons to another state. Even if that is not enough to halt the sale (and it may not be), Saudi Arabia would be wary of having these weapons transferred to its territory in advance of any crisis. First, there would be no urgent security threat to address. Second, Riyadh would fear being exposed if the shipment was caught. And third, if the weapons arrived safely, Saudi Arabia would then have to worry about Israel learning of the transfer and its subsequent vulnerability to an Israeli preemptive strike. (An additional challenge for Riyadh would be maintaining these weapons, but this could theoretically be handled by Pakistani technicians.)

And if there was a crisis with Iran, it would hardly be the optimal time to transfer nuclear weapons. The United States would have increased its physical military presence in the region. The region would also have come under greater surveillance by the United States and others, which would increase the risk of having a shipment detected and interdicted. (It is likely that U.S. warships and surveillance assets would be on alert for just this type of transfer.) And during a crisis, it is inconceivable that the United States would not be heavily involved both militarily and diplomatically with Riyadh to provide reassurance about Washington's commitment to its defense and thus prevent the perception that Riyadh would need to rely on Pakistan's nuclear weapons in the first place.

The bottom line is that the transfer of Pakistani nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia, whether "early" or "late," presents significant challenges. Riyadh could not be confident that it could gain operational control over such weapons or, if such control was gained, that it could be maintained for very long.

Bandwagoning

Iran's neighbors would have the ability to select what form of bandwagoning they preferred: a formal de facto or de jure alliance, a "soft" accommodation, or something in between.

Formal bandwagoning between Middle Eastern states and Iran is unlikely. It is hard to conceive, at this moment, that any of the GCC states, Egypt, Jordan, or Turkey would formally align themselves with a nuclear-armed Iran. Strategic interests are too much opposed, religious and cultural differences too large, wariness of Tehran's ability to arouse their Shia populations too great, and the attractiveness of the existing security arrangements too strong.

Any tilt toward Tehran, if it occurs, would likely be less definitive than a formal alliance. Perhaps most likely is that Iran's neighbors would start to subtly accommodate themselves to Tehran. This might take the shape of "diplomatic deconflicting," taking extra care to ensure that relations remain friendly. Increasing the size of their diplomatic missions in Tehran, welcoming Iranian officials to the capitals with full honors, inviting Iranian officials to attend GCC meetings, sponsoring cultural ex-

changes—there are a host of ways in which Iran's neighbors might want to signal a more accommodating stance.

Midway between a formal alliance and some "soft" accommodation would lie a number of worrisome measures that would suggest these states' susceptibility to Iran's growing influence. Examples would include the oil-producers among these countries parroting the Iranian line on pricing; Iranian pressure to downsize the U.S. and Western presence in these countries, especially U.S. military bases in Iraq and the Gulf; Iranian pressure not to purchase Western military equipment; Iranian pressure to oppose steps toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement; and Iranian pressure to help Tehran avoid the full consequences of economic sanctions (should they remain in place after it had become a nuclear weapons state).

Balancing

In summer 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed the creation of a "security umbrella" for states in the region if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons. Such a security umbrella would be designed to both deter Iran and reassure the United States' friends in the region.

How much confidence would these countries have in the United States after it has decided to accept the previously "unacceptable"—that is, a nuclear-armed Iran? Expressed bluntly, would they entrust their future security to the United States?

Recent history suggests they may hesitate. The United States has not done a very good job of deterring Iran's misbehavior in the past, even omitting its failure to halt the nuclear weapons program (under this scenario). Iran has been interfering in Iraq and Afghanistan for years; it is responsible for the deaths of U.S. servicemen and women. It has supported, armed, and supplied Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. It supports Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and the West Bank. Frederick Kagan's paper contains additional examples.

So what type of behavior would it take to reassure these countries that, this time, the United States would act credibly to defend their interests when it appears to have been reluctant to defend its own? (There is also the related question of whether they would trust America's judgment—that the United States would act wisely as well.) Is confidence in the United States waxing or waning? If it was a stock, would a GCC investor decide to go long or short it?

These states will have a menu of security options to choose from. Balancing with the United States could take many forms. These range from declaratory statements to formal agreements to enhanced diplomatic interaction to de jure alliances, including an enhanced GCC with the United States as a member. Would American security assurances be sufficient to reassure the GCC states? Would they require a formal security assurance or security guarantee? Would they demand a treaty with a NATO-like Article V provision for "automatic" involvement? Would off-shore balancing be sufficient? After all, navies come and navies go. Would they welcome a greater U.S. military presence in the region—boots on the ground—with more U.S. troops, trainers, ships, and jets actually based on their territory?

Or would these states be interested in a collective security arrangement with the United States as a member? The GCC states already have a security framework and there have recently been some calls for it to expand its membership to include Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. But the GCC has so far been less than the sum of its parts, an organization of proud, highly competitive, and not terribly cooperative states. It is always possible that a nuclear-armed Iran would concentrate their attention and compel them to band together; pool resources; engage in joint planning, training, and operations; invite the United States to join; and generally start to act like an alliance. But there is nothing in their individual or collective histories that would suggest that this will happen or that they would do so by themselves.

It is hard to know in advance which of these options or which collection of these options would be attractive to each of Iran's neighbors. But there are at least two potential problems with balancing Iran by moving closer to the United States.

First, if the Soviet-American competition is any model, at some point these states may start to worry that U.S. declaratory policy and force deployments would run the risk of provoking Iran and exacerbating a tough situation. During the Reagan administration especially, Europeans voiced great concern that Washington was needlessly and recklessly provoking the Soviet Union.[1] The same geopolitical fact would apply to the Gulf as it did to Europe—they are very close to the threat and the United States is very far away. That fact alone will make calibrating the right "amount of security" a challenge for future U.S. administrations.

Second, greater reliance on the United States by countries in the Middle East would play directly into the narrative that Osama bin Laden has been preaching for the past decade and a half: that these countries are run by venal apostates who are propped up on their thrones by Washington; together, they are robbing the Arab and Muslim people of their spiritual and financial inheritance. It is expected that these rulers would be sensitive to such claims and be torn between their fear of the external threat of Iran, which would push them toward the United States, and their fear of the internal threat of religiously fueled unrest and instability, which would push them away from the United States. (Iran, of course, has a variety of means to sharpen this dilemma for the GCC states.) In either case, this dilemma will further complicate the United States' ability to manage security in the region.

None of these three options—self-help, bandwagoning, or balancing—is optimal from the perspective of states in the Middle East (or of the United States). None completely solves the security and political dilemmas that a nuclear-armed Iran would present.

Under the circumstances, the most likely outcome is for countries in the region not to go "all-in" on any one of these approaches. Rather, they would hedge their bets among these options, constantly calibrating how much or how little of each approach would be prudent, but with the goal of providing them with as much flexibility and room for maneuver as possible.

And these states may not just hedge between two options, but "double-hedge"—pursue a combination of all three options simultaneously. For example, they would not only continue to acquire advanced conventional weapons and perhaps explore some civil nuclear technologies, but would also want to rely more heavily on the United States and make nice with (or at least not gratuitously aggravate) Iran. The more skillful among them would try to play Washington and Tehran off each other to their own advantage.

Final Thoughts

Finally, a few words about what might be called the "false comfort" of "red lines." As part of the argument that the United States could preserve its interests in a Middle East where Tehran had nuclear weapons, a number of scholars have written that Washington would need to reassert its interests by unambiguously declaring that there were now red lines beyond which the Iranians could not trespass. In their *Foreign Affairs* article, Lindsay and Takeyh outline three such red lines: no initiation of conventional warfare against other countries, no use or transfer of nuclear weapons, materials or technologies, and no stepped-up support for terrorist or subversive activities. Should Iran cross any of these lines, the United States would respond with military force, up to and including the use of nuclear weapons.

No doubt the articulation of red lines may provide a synthetic sense of security and the feeling of some control over a situation that has clearly gone badly. Proponents of this view may also believe that this type of rhetorical muscle-flexing will help inoculate them from criticism that they are being overly fatalistic or defeatist on the subject of halting Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The use of red lines should not be completely dismissed in all circumstances. Yet here it raises two questions. First, a nonnuclear Iran has already been engaging in at least some of these activities and the United States has not responded militarily or even very forcefully. Why would a nuclear-armed and swaggeringly self-confident Iran worry overly about the United States now objecting to behavior that it has previously tolerated for years?

Second, why would the United States be more willing to use military force after Iran has acquired nuclear weapons than beforehand? If the United States now decides that it would no longer tolerate such behavior, the situation would then seem ripe for miscalculation by decision-makers in Tehran, and hence increase the risk of a military and possibly nuclear confrontation.

Endnotes

1. An excellent example of this thinking is Michael Howard, "Reassurance and Deterrence: Western Defense in the 1980s," *Foreign Affairs,* vol. 61, no. 2 (Winter 1982), pp. 309–24.