

Iran: How Real is the Threat?

I am going to offer a contrarian, a non-conformist view.

When I was serving in Vienna I believed that Iran's leaders were intent on acquiring nuclear weapons, and I saw this as a threat to one of the most valuable pillars of the international order, the nuclear non-proliferation regime. So I thought the West was right to try to stop them by depriving them of the capacity to enrich uranium.

But since 2007 I have come to believe that Iran's decision-making is based on cost-benefit calculations and that they have realised that the costs of becoming nuclear-armed would far outweigh the benefits. I've come to see the West's policy, essentially unchanged since 2003, as misguided. Let me explain why.

Changed Threat Assessment

In late 2007 the US intelligence community produced an assessment. The key sentences read: "We judge with high confidence that in Fall 2003 Tehran halted its nuclear weapon program, ... but that it is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons". This continues to be their assessment.

Public statements by Russian leaders and a leak to an Israeli newspaper suggest that their intelligence agencies make similar assessments. What these experts – and the IAEA – are saying is that Iran researched into the production of nuclear weapons up to 2003, but late that year downsized its goal from the acquisition of weapons to the acquisition of the wherewithal to produce weapons. This latter option is not outlawed by the NPT: US officials have long known that it is possible for an NPT party to achieve "nuclear pregnancy" as they dubbed it in 1968 without violating the Treaty, and the Treaty's withdrawal provision only makes sense on that basis.

If one tries to imagine the situation from the other side of the hill, as good generals are wont to do, the US assessment looks all the more credible. Iran's leaders have little incentive to go beyond acquiring a latent capability, and several good reasons not to take such a risky step.

A recent head of US Strategic Command observed that when a threat assessment changes, the strategic posture should also change.

The Iranian threat assessment changed at the end of 2007. The West's policy should have changed as a consequence but it hasn't. Depriving Iran of a latent nuclear weapons capability is no longer necessary, yet it remains the central objective of Western policy.

Perceptions of Injustice

This leads to Western tactics that are widely seen outside the West as unjust.

Iran has not been in non-compliance with its NPT obligations since its IAEA safeguards failures were corrected in the course of 2004. Those safeguard failures were significant but much less serious than those of Iraq prior to 1991 or North Korea at the end of 2002.

Yet thanks to Western contrivance the UN Security Council has adopted five resolutions under chapter VII creating so-called “international obligations” for Iran and imposing sanctions.

This is seen outside the West as a disproportionate response to Iran’s non-compliance, aggravated by the fact that none of these chapter VII resolutions has been justified by an explicit determination that Iran’s nuclear activities represent a threat to peace and security.

Some of you may think justice has no place in international affairs. I would ask you to reflect on the idea that declining powers have much to gain from a strong international order built on respect for international law. I sense that this is what President Clinton had in mind when he observed that the US had twenty years to create an international order in which the US could feel secure once it had ceased to be the sole superpower.

Conversely, injustice impacts on soft power. It saddened me in Vienna to see how the UK and France lost the moral authority they enjoyed in the IAEA Board in 2003 by insisting that Iran prolong indefinitely its suspension of enrichment. Worse, by applying a double standard to Iran, we bred cynicism in relation to the very regime we saw ourselves as defending.

Incidentally, Iranians crave justice. Divine justice is central to Shi’a though not to Sunni beliefs, and Zoroastrianism foreshadowed Christianity by positing a divine judge who determines the deserts of the souls of the dead.

Forced Agreements and Motivation

Western policy is also misguided in that it risks aggravating the threat it seeks to address. I won’t try your patience with speculations about whether Western sanctions will achieve their purpose – although my reading of Iranians’ sense of identity (conscious of their own worth and determined to reverse 300 years of decline) is that it will take many years for sanctions to cause Iran to capitulate.

Instead I want to make a simple point. Agreements imposed on a prostrate foe are unlikely to last. Machiavelli, patron-saint of realists, once wrote:

“I believe that forced agreements will be kept neither by princes nor by republics”.

History bears him out. Compare French reactions to the 1815 European settlement with their reactions to the settlement imposed on them by Germany in 1871. Compare German reactions to the 1925 Locarno Treaties and the post-WWII settlement with their reactions to the treaty imposed on them at Versailles.

My thesis is that a negotiated agreement can minimise the risk that Iran’s leaders will be motivated to misuse their enrichment capabilities whereas a forced agreement will give them a motive to proliferate.

In the long run it’s motivation that counts, not capabilities. Americans are obsessed with prohibiting capabilities – it’s in their culture – but prohibition can never be a lasting remedy. For the long term one has to rely on influencing motivation. Brazil and Japan have much more extensive enrichment capabilities than Iran, and have researched into nuclear weapon production, but we do not lie awake worrying about that because we sense they lack the motive to do us harm.

Objections to a Deal based on the NPT

In the few minutes remaining to me let me just try to touch on three common objections to what I am advocating, which is a deal based on the NPT: tolerance of an Iranian enrichment capability as long as Iran gives the best possible guarantees that none of its nuclear material will be diverted to military use.

The first is the claim that Iranians can’t be trusted.

We used to say the same thing about Soviet Russia. Yet the West negotiated several agreements with the USSR that stood the test of time.

A good agreement contains provision for verification. Verification over time conduces to the development of trust.

Since WWII Iranians have honoured several agreements with the West: 1954, 1981, 1991 and 2003. Whereas pressure failed to deliver what the West wanted in 1951-53 and 1979-80.

Iran’s leaders are not suicidal fanatics; they are rational actors (that is the US intelligence assessment). They know that a second betrayal of the trust of NPT parties would leave them friendless. Frederick the Great once observed that one can get way with one breach of faith but not two.

The second objection is that the Saudis won’t tolerate an Iranian enrichment capability

In my view Saudi concerns are essentially expressions of rivalry. So helping Saudi Arabia to keep up with Iran is the solution to them. I suggest URENCO sell to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which is building four nuclear power reactors, an enrichment plant, under safeguards of course and with key technology black-boxed.

This can be the first of the multinational enrichment centres the IAEA has been advocating. Hosting such a plant can do wonders for Saudi Arabian confidence.

Third are Israeli concerns.

The Israeli angle is complex. I have only time to say this.

Israeli opinion concerning the Iranian threat is diverse. Only the other day Israel's Deputy PM said that the unresolved Palestinian issue was a greater threat to Israel than Iran. Israeli military leaders do not believe it is necessary or desirable to attack Iranian nuclear facilities. A majority of the Israeli public is opposed to a go-it-alone Israeli strike. Israeli diplomats know that an attack on Iran would be a serious violation of the UN Charter: another state's possession of a latent nuclear weapons capability does not add up to a self-defence justification.

Prior to the end of the Cold War Israelis shrugged off Iranian vituperation and absurd Iranian threats. It was only in 1992 that Labour politicians decided Iran could be useful to Israel as a strategic threat.

In a recent exercise at the UK Defence Academy the team playing the part of Israel ended up opening a channel to Tehran with a view to arriving at a mutual non-aggression understanding. That's what Israel should be doing, in my view.

Finally, some argue that the West should not be negotiating with a state that abuses the rights of its citizens and sponsors terrorism. Virtuous powers (if that's what the Western powers are) sometimes have to deal with less virtuous powers (if that's what Iran is) to achieve a common good.

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