

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE: CAN A NUCLEAR IRAN BE DETERRED?

by Dr. Gerald Steinberg

The Iranian government's effort to develop the capability to produce nuclear weapons poses a formidable challenge. Armed with nuclear weapons, the radical Islamic leadership could trigger confrontations and crises that would quickly escalate out of control, particularly given the very limited knowledge of and contact with the outside world, and its close links with terror groups such as Hizballah and Hamas. Iran, with these allies or subsidiary groups, is viewed as posing the greatest danger to Israel's survival, and frequent emotion-filled declarations of intent to "wipe Israel off the map" are often matched by actions. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, as well as Turkey and other countries that are within range of Teheran growing "sphere of influence," and of course in the US, the prospect of a nuclear armed Iran – a core member of the "axis of evil" – is very unsettling.

This nightmare scenario is not new and did not suddenly become apparent following the revelations regarding the extent of the links between Iran and A. Q. Khan, the head of the Pakistani "nuclear Walmart," to use International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director Dr. Mohammed El-Baradei's terminology. The evidence that Iran has been secretly acquiring facilities and materials for an illicit nuclear weapons capability, in violation of its Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments, has been increasingly evident. Continued development of large-scale uranium enrichment facilities, as well as other key components of the atomic fuel cycle, clearly show Iran's goal of obtaining nuclear weapons.

Over the past decade, high-level international committees were formed to consider the diplomatic and military options and their implications in detail. Attempts were made to persuade Russia and China to stop the flow of unsafeguarded technologies and expertise into Iran. This supply-side approach to non-proliferation was clearly an example of "too little, too late." Similarly, discussions of international fuel-cycle facilities that would prevent individual countries, such as Iran, from acquiring the technology and materials to make nuclear weapons, are also well intentioned but unrealistic in the time frame in which action must



Photo Credit: Digital Globe, courtesy of ISIS

The Natanz site is a potential Iranian uranium enrichment facility (possibly a gas centrifuge site), and is located approximately 100 miles south of Tehran.

be taken before Teheran reaches the finish line.

Taking another approach, the European "troika," consisting of Britain, France and Germany, tried the opposite route, offering Iran advanced technology, including civil nuclear facilities but without the fuel cycle, in exchange for abandoning their illicit weapons program. In November 2003, with great fanfare, an agreement between Iran and the Europeans was announced in which Iran agreed, or so it seemed, to freeze its uranium enrichment activities and also open up the facilities to IAEA inspection. But a few months later, when IAEA inspectors began to arrive at these sites to check for signs of enrichment and other fuel cycle activities, their access was limited, and what they found confirmed that the Iranian activities were continuing. So the Europeans tried again, and a year later, another agreement was announced, but at the same time, Iran continued to move closer to an indigenous weapons capability.

If the current regime that controls the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be persuaded to drop its nuclear ambitions, perhaps a different and more liberal regime would be less obsessed with this project, and also recognize the inherent dangers. Indeed, a few years ago, many diplomats and analysts thought that the reformist movement under President Khatimi would be that moderating force in Iran which would slow, if not stop the pursuit of nuclear weapons, and would pursue a more stable foreign policy.

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However, in the past few years, Iran's "hardliners" have reasserted control, making regime change in the next few years seem unlikely.

As a result of the failure of these initiatives, the "window" within which Iran might be stopped short of the finish line is closing quickly. Hopes that the political leadership of the IAEA would suddenly acknowledge the overwhelming evidence of cheating, which the agency's own reports (available at the IAEA internet site) show began almost two decades ago, are disappearing (if such hopes were ever realistic), and the time remaining for the imposition of sanctions to prevent the production of enriched uranium is fading. The European efforts may have slowed the pace of uranium enrichment during the past year, and may be able to further extend the timeframe for a diplomatic solution. But the odds of success are small.

If, as is feared, diplomatic efforts, led largely by Europe, fail, this will leave two main options for responding to the Iranian nuclear capabilities – military action in the form of a preventive attack, or acceptance of the situation and reliance of deterrence. As will be discussed below, military action would be complex and risky. But at the same time, stable deterrence may be even riskier, particularly for Israel, but also for the US and Europe. The prospects for stable deterrence involving the current Iranian regime are quite slim, and the dangers of instability are alarming.

Assessing the Military Option

In July 1981, the Israeli Air Force launched a daring raid that destroyed Iraq's Osiraq nuclear research reactor complex. The small sortie overflew Saudi Arabia and dropped a number of gravity bombs (as distinct from the more modern precision guided weapons) on the target before returning to Israel. The decision to use military force, despite the complexity and the inherent risks of detection and possible confrontation, was taken after the Israeli government had tried for many months to persuade the French, who were building and supplying the uranium fuel rods for this reactor, that this project would place nuclear weapons in the very dangerous hands of Saddam Hussein. When the diplomatic

options had all failed, and the reactor was about to go operational, the military alternative was chosen and implemented.

The result was that Iraq and Saddam Hussein never were able to realize their nuclear ambitions. The French never came back to rebuild the reactor at Osiraq, and the Iraqi nuclear program only began to recover at the end of the decade. While Saddam sought to make up for the lost time with a crash program, the 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent rigorous inspection program kept him from realizing this goal. Thus, the Israeli strategy is seen as a successful model of counter-proliferation.

But there are many differences between Iraq of 1981 and Iran of 2005. Learning the lessons of Osiraq, Iran has dispersed, hidden, and hardened its nuclear facilities, making them far less

vulnerable to attack than was the case in Iraq. No single air attack would be able to destroy the multiple elements that constitute the Iranian program. In addition, Iran has a significant retaliatory capability, including Shihab 3 missiles with a range of 1300 kilometers, which could be equipped with chemical or biological agents.

Nevertheless, the military option for dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat cannot be ruled out. Although the Iranian decision makers have taken steps to insure the survivability of these targets, they remain vulnerable. The US and Israel have also advanced significantly in

terms of intelligence, targeting and penetration in the past 24 years. Ground attacks and massive waves of airborne missiles aimed at Iranian military assets are also unnecessary to destroy the 15 to 20 key installations that are at the heart of Iran's nuclear weapons program. And even if some survive, and others are well hidden and are not subject to attack, the large buildings housing the banks of centrifuges used for enrichment, as well as their very visible power supplies and related systems, would be damaged to the point that rebuilding would take many years.

However, preventive attack is clearly a problematic option and a policy of "last resort." It would unite the Iranian public behind the current regime, ending or at least delaying hope for emergence of a moderate and representative government for many years. As noted, Iran might seek to use missiles and weapons of mass destruction, or terror groups, in attacks of revenge and retaliation. Therefore, decision makers and analysts



Prior to the recent uranium enrichment revelations, the Bushehr nuclear reactor, pictured above, was the primary source of concern of the international community.

are considering the prospects of deterrence vis-a-vis a nuclear armed Iran.

Can Deterrence Work with Iran?

Opponents of military action to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons often argue that while a preventive attack could unleash a cycle of retribution and counter-attack, the Iranian leadership is cautious and would not use nuclear weapons to attack other countries, including Israel. Indeed, a strong (if incomplete) case can be made for this relatively benign analysis. Iran's drive for nuclear weapons has numerous sources, including regional power ambitions, the sense of vulnerability in a hostile Arab and Sunni-dominated region, and a history of warfare, including the Iraqi invasion and 8-year long war during the 1980s. In addition, the survival of the regime is under threat, both from internal pressure and from the US government, and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is seen as a form of insurance policy.

However, the evidence also shows that the Iranian regime has aggressive objectives that contribute greatly to instability in the region. In the terminology of international relations theory, Iran is a revisionist state, uninterested in preserving the status quo, but rather, seeking to expand and use its capabilities to alter the international and regional political framework. The regime's extreme Islamic ideology, declarations of unmitigated hostility, and support for terrorist groups such as Hizballah and Hamas are seen as posing an existential threat to Israel. In 2001, then President Rafsanjani called the establishment of Israel the "worst event in history," and declared, "In due time the Islamic world will have a military nuclear device, and then the strategy of the West would reach a dead end, since one bomb is enough to destroy all Israel." Similarly, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei declared "that the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted" This obsession is also reflected in highly anti-Semitic programs on Iranian television, as well as the transfer of shiploads of missiles, explosives and weapons to Palestinian terror groups. Israeli security officials point to Iranian financing, planning, training, intelligence, and other involvement in suicide bombing and other terror attacks by groups such as Hamas.

Iran is also the major supporter of Hizballah, which continues to launch limited attacks across the Lebanese border with Israel, and has deployed over 10,000 tactical missiles, including the Iranian made Fajr 5, with a range of 75 kilometers. These weapons provide an umbrella for periodic attacks on the Israeli side of the border, and is also the model for Palestinian groups operating in Gaza. This confrontation is inherently unstable, and at some point, Hizballah's salami tactics are likely to trigger a rapid escalation into a full-scale confrontation. In addition, Hizballah, aided directly by Iranian officials, is viewed by Israeli and others as being responsible for the terror blasts in Buenos Aires, Argentina that destroyed the Israeli embassy and the Jewish community building in 1992 and 1994, killing dozens of people. Hizballah (via its Al Manr satellite television broadcasts) has also emerged as one of the most virulent sources of incitement

and anti-Semitism.

Historically, in response to other threats to national survival, Israel has placed primary emphasis on maintaining a credible and robust deterrence capability. The deep structural asymmetries in the region (territorial extent, demography, etc.) make Israel appear to be vulnerable to a crippling first strike, and the capability to inflict overwhelming and disproportionate costs regardless of the extent of the initial attack has been a central feature in deterring attack. This is the case with respect to conventional warfare (based on overwhelming air superiority and highly mobile ground forces), as well as providing the foundation for the development of the Dimona nuclear complex, Jericho ballistic missile technology, and the policy of "deliberate ambiguity."

This policy has served Israel well, to date. Egypt opted for a deliberately limited strategy in the 1973 war in order to avoid triggering an Israeli strategic response, and in 1991, the decision by Saddam Hussein not to use chemical or biological warheads in the missile attacks on Israel is also attributed to fear of overwhelming Israeli retaliation. Furthermore, Israel's nuclear capability and the realization that Israel could not be "wiped off the map" without massive retaliation were important factors in initiating peace processes with Egypt, Jordan and beyond.

However, the development of an Iranian nuclear capability and a multipolar nuclear environment would end the stability resulting from the ambiguous Israeli nuclear posture, and would fundamentally change the calculus of strategic deterrence in all major dimensions. In the context of a multipolar nuclear Middle East, and the need for a credible second-strike capability, maintenance of Israel's policy of deliberate ambiguity ("don't ask, don't declare, and don't test") would become increasingly difficult.

Credibility and communications are central components of stable deterrence, and a more overt and visible nuclear weapons capability may be seen as necessary to avoid Iranian (and wider regional) misperceptions, particularly given the isolation of decision makers in Iran. However, the isolation of Iran's leaders, the fog that surrounds its decision making structures, the absence of direct channels of communication, and its radical religious-based revisionist objectives will make the development of stable deterrence extremely difficult. While the Iranian leadership is not seen as suicidal, or particularly prone to high-stakes risk taking (in contrast to Saddam Hussein and other Arab leaders), there are likely to be many misperceptions regarding Israeli intentions and red-lines. And with many potential triggers for crises and escalation between Tehran and Jerusalem, including Hizballah, Hamas, and extremist elements within Iran, the difficulties in managing these crises in a nuclear environment will pose formidable challenges.

In order to diminish these dangers, Iranian leaders will have to renounce their destabilizing revisionist and revolutionary objectives, and develop links with Israel, including diplomatic relations. During the Cold War, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and management of ongoing strategic relations proved difficult enough, even with diplomatic ties and periodic summit meetings



The Arak site is a potential heavy water production facility, and is located about 150 miles south of Tehran.

between US and Soviet leaders. This is also true with respect to India and Pakistan, which came close to mutual destruction following their respective decisions to test nuclear weapons. The policy of boycotting the "Zionist entity" must be seen as particularly irresponsible and dangerous for a country armed with nuclear weapons and itself a target for massive retaliation. In addition, in order to develop a stable deterrence relationship, ties with destabilizing terrorist groups and extremists will need to be cut, for the survival of Iran itself.

Messianic Visions: A Middle East Zone Free of WMD

One of the proposed means to prevent Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons is a "grand agreement" that would include, in addition to resolution of US-Iran issues, a trade-off involving Israel's nuclear deterrent option.

However, as long as the Middle East conflict are unresolved, the "grand bargain" concepts are unrealistic. As the cases of Iraq, North Korea, and now Iran clearly demonstrate, the ability of international mechanisms such as the IAEA to effectively monitor and assure compliance with non-proliferation treaties is far from adequate. Furthermore, the US and the other members of the UN Security Council have shown that they will not take risks regarding their own interests by using force or even imposing effective sanctions to gain compliance. From the perspective of core security perceptions and requirements, these idealistic hopes are not credible options in a Middle East characterized by warfare and continuous terrorism, which are, in turn, fuelled by deep hos-

tility and perceived threats to survival.

In the long term, however, and assuming that the region survives the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the potential for negotiation of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (MENWFZ) is likely to increase. In contrast to the international and universal arms control framework, including the NPT, IAEA, Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), etc., which have proven highly ineffective in the case of Iran, as well Iraq and Libya, a system of mutual inspection based on a specially tailored verification regime, could, in theory, be successful.

In the process of learning to develop and manage a stable deterrence relationship, direct communication links will eventually be established. The populations of the respective players, including Iran, may go through a process similar to that of the US and Soviet Union, as well as Europe during the Cold War, and demand measures that reduce the risks of mutual assured destruction. This process will be assisted by, and could also lead to internal political changes, including democratization, in order to create

more responsive and accountable governments (although, realistically, the politics of extremist nationalism and religious exclusivity will remain very powerful forces).

At the same time, the zero-sum frameworks that have dominated may evolve into more cooperative situations, in which confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) may evolve, not due to pressures and inducements from the outside, but from the internal recognition of the elements necessary for national survival.

However, for all of the reasons explained in this analysis, this process, if it happens, could take many years or decades, and during this period, avoidance of nuclear destruction will be tenuous, at best. For the current political and strategic horizon, as this analysis has indicated, the prevention of Middle East nuclear proliferation by focusing on halting the illicit Iranian acquisition of fissile material, remains the best policy option. Other regional steps, such as mutual recognition and reliable communications will be necessary, in order to manage the relationship and prevent nuclear destruction. At the same time, proposals that lack credibility and are based on amorphous and unreliable "international guarantees," such as those which have failed to prevent Iranian, Iraqi, Libyan and other violations of their NPT commitments, and that will endanger Israel's survival, are counterproductive and unrealistic. ■

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part, the College makes available dedicated, knowledgeable, and experienced members of the staff to guide and supervise the students' development.

Within the College, there is a continuous system of evaluation to ensure the programmes of study attain the established educational objectives. The College also monitors all forms of lessons learned from ongoing operations with a view to maintain currency of curriculum content. Most of the external validation has been less formal and has relied on the expert knowledge derived from the annual change of staff and on the feedback from operational commanders employing CFC graduates. Validation initiatives have been given greater attention since the creation of the new headquarters of the Canadian Defence Academy.

One of the highlights of the courses is the comprehensive and varied programme of Field Study Exercises (FSEs). These particular activities provide our students with the opportunity to gain practical, firsthand insights into many areas of endeavour with which they might not be familiar. For example, an FSE early in the CSC exposes students to all elements that comprise the Canadian Forces. Later in the CSC, during the single-service phase, students visit formations and facilities related to their environment, within North America as well as in Europe. Field Studies included in the DP4 programme provide students with an

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unification society. South Korea, China and other regional governments have long been greatly concerned about the instability and refugee flows likely to accompany any change of government in North Korea. By beginning to employ North Koreans in foreign-funded economic projects, by bringing more outside visitors and information to the country, by gradually building relationships with North Korean officials, economic and political engagement of the North will help to ease the transition when the two Koreans become one.

If the WMD were not an issue, broad-based engagement of both Iran and North Korea would make obvious strategic sense. The challenge is to design an engagement-based strategy for non-proliferation that minimizes the very real risks that engagement poses – including the risks of propping up two repressive regimes, allowing them to continue covert nuclear weapons development, and creating the opportunity for them to sell or give WMD to other countries or groups.

The economic elements of engagement, for example, need to be designed carefully, with the goal of reaching the people directly and keeping corruption and government theft to a minimum. Both countries need to be drawn into (or back into) Agreed Framework-style nuclear control regimes that cap Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs at their current levels and offer intrusive inspection procedures. Washington and its allies could continue and expand efforts such as the Proliferation Security Initiative, as well as bolstering related intelligence operations, all

experiential opportunity to more closely examine a number of issues covered on the NSSC: intergovernmental processes, National Security Policy, strategic headquarters organizations, strategic planning processes, joint doctrine, and force capabilities of other nations and international organizations.

For those selected to attend, the Command and Staff College experience represents a unique opportunity to develop their professional knowledge and personal potential. While on course, the students principal concern is to broaden their military horizons and share the expertise. They then return to the 'real world' better prepared for additional responsibilities and higher rank. The ever-changing conditions in today's world are leading to increasing complex challenges. This, coupled with restructuring and downsizing the forces, means that, more than ever, we must have a professional competent officer corps; we need knowledge, productive and innovative leaders capable of providing informed, sound decisions. While I am confident that the College contributes significantly in providing these skills, the process must, of course, commence well before attending the College and continue long after graduations. Senior officers are no longer in a position to rely mostly on their own operational experience; rather they require the additional dimension that education provides. ■

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designed to intercept any shipments of WMD from Iran and North Korea to third parties. Efforts can be expanded to thwart other destabilizing Iranian and North Korean actions, such as support for terrorism, drug trafficking, and money laundering. As the engagement proceeds, the expanded international presence in both countries should be used to shore up local non-governmental organizations, to push for human rights, and to spread information as widely as possible.

This strategy is hardly perfect. It does not offer any iron-clad guarantees against nuclear cheating – but, short of invasion and occupation of both countries, neither does any other option on the table. It risks indirectly reinforcing both regimes. Pyongyang and Tehran will surely do everything in their power to obstruct the strategy's change-oriented elements, such as the proposed contacts with local NGOs and efforts to spread information.

But this approach – which might be called "coercive engagement" – takes seriously two unarguable realities of the Iranian and North Korean situations: the practical impossibility of a military option, and the inevitability of eventual regime change in both places. This approach represents a strategy of capping WMD programs, reducing tensions, pushing for reform and change where possible, and waiting the regimes out. It reflects patience and realism in what can be accomplished short of war, and it attempts to balance short- and long-term interests. It is hardly an ideal outcome, but with regard to these enormously taxing strategic challenges, it reflects the best we can hope for. ■

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