

Revisiting the Iranian nuclear threat prompted by new leaders in America, Israel, and Iran

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Introduction

It's the same old story even though there are three new leaders, President Biden in the United States of America, Prime Minister Bennet in Israel and President Ebrahim Raisi in Iran. Why is it the same old story? The facts remain the same, the threat is that Iran is about to become a nuclear state very shortly, yet it is not actually becoming one. We have been hearing about this for at least 15 years if not 30. The story is that the Iranian's are threatening. And it's just that, a threat and no more. There are no nuclear weapons. That's okay with everyone including the Iranians because this is their version of Nuclear Deterrence.

Background

The story starts in 1970 under the Iranian regime of the Shah when Iran became a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). That is a Cold War treaty between the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) not to give anyone a nuclear weapon if they didn't already have one, but still permitted civilian atomic energy use by everyone. Other states who didn't have nuclear weapons signed agreeing not to try to acquire them, including Iran. So the word non-proliferation in its title was its intent.

The story jumps to 2002/2003 with a new Iranian regime under the Ayatollah when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported Iran's alleged non-compliance over undeclared activities. Iran had apparently violated the NPT! Iran had apparently torn up the international treaty it had previously agreed to. That is a real possibility in the international system when a domestic regime or leader is replaced by another.

The story jumps to 2013 when Iran and the P5+1 states (the United States, Russia, China, France, and United Kingdom who are the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and all nuclear powers – that is the P, and Germany that is the + 1) signed a Joint Plan of Action (JCPOA) (temporary plan) with voluntary measures that was consummated and issued in 2015. It was aimed at preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons and if it did not then sanctions would be lifted.

Israel said the JCPOA was a bad deal because there was not sufficient monitoring abilities no guarantee that Iran would not acquire nuclear weapons. In May 2018 President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA. That is a real possibility in the international system when a domestic regime or leader is replaced by another. In February 2021 President Biden started to renegotiate with Iran over a new diplomatic arrangement. That is a real possibility in the international system when a domestic regime or leader is replaced by another. The other signatories to the JCPOA did not withdraw so maybe it

was still valid, maybe not. Throughout Israel claimed that Iran was apparently enriching uranium for a nuclear weapon and developing missiles to deliver it.

Diplomacy

What does this mean. Well, if one looks at the NPT one sees that the JCPOA is not really needed if one were to sign the NPT and stick to that. That is because there are three articles in the NPT that if Iran adhered to them would mean that Iran would agree not to acquire nuclear weapons but could enrich uranium for civil energy. These are Article II “Non-nuclear weapon States undertake not to receive or manufacture nuclear explosive devices or assistance thereon.” Article III “Non-nuclear weapon States undertake to accept IAEA safeguards to prevent diversion of nuclear energy from peaceful purposes.” Article IV “Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes in conformity with Articles I and II.”

The Israeli and President Trump view, without real saying so, is that as Iran has torn up the NPT it could also tear up the JCPOA or any other diplomatically negotiated treaty. They are asking: Does anyone trust the Iranian word? Or rely on their actions? The issue goes further that just diplomatic arrangements. It is all about friends. Iran is not in the American Camp and it makes verbal threats and sponsors terror groups against American allies including Israel. Such intent coupled with nuclear capability is a dangerous combination. But before looking at ways to tackle it, let’s look back to see when the Iranian nuclear program was OKAY and what went wrong.

Iran’s quest for the nuclear genie

For a start let’s look at the pre-NPT pre-1970 world. For example in 1957 the USA and Iran signed a civilian nuclear cooperation pact. The USA provided technical aid and several kilograms of enriched uranium to help Iran build its first nuclear reactor. In 1967 the USA provided “a package containing 554 kilograms of highly enriched uranium and 112 grams of plutonium” (Entessar 2009, 26). In 1974 the Shah, was encouraged by the USA to diversify Iran’s energy resources and launched a program to build 23 nuclear reactors (The Christian Science Monitor 2009, 15). In the mid-1970s the Iranian government receives nuclear assistance from other nations, including West Germany (Kraftwerk Union and Siemens), France, India and South Africa.

However, in 1979 the Islamic Revolution overthrew the Shah. Nuclear cooperation with the West ended and then in 2002/2003 Iran allegedly violates the NPT. Ironically, declassified American documents reveal a remarkable continuity between the Shah’s nuclear logic and that of the Islamic Republic. (Entessar 2009, 28). And then between 1980-1988 the Iranian threat emerged. During the Iran-Iraq war, Baghdad bombed Iran’s two nuclear reactors at Bushehr.

The Iranian Question

Have times changed since then? No, it is still the same story and the same Iranian threat. To examine this lets look at what was said in 2006 to see that in 2021 the Iranian nuclear threat is no different than what was faced then. For example Ansari wrote in 2006 “the nuclear impasse is a consequence of a far wider problem between Iran and its neighbours and characteristics of the whole region, not its cause. A nuclear solution will not solve the Iranian question” (Ansari 2006, 27).

The Iranian Question goes beyond the Iranian Nuclear Threat and also why America and Israel feel threatened. The Iranian Question is: 1) the support of proxy terror groups – and so an Iranian nuclear umbrella to these proxy terrorist group for example Hezbollah inhibiting Israeli action against it, 2) verbal threats against Israel’s very existence and so a direct Iranian nuclear strike on an Israeli civilian

or military target, 3) the Shia Iranian world in conflict with the Saudi and wider Sunni world and so a nuclear Iran could lead to the nuclearization of the entire region as other states for example Saudi Arabia acquire nuclear weapons to deter or defend against Iran. And these three are just the tip of the iceberg

Let's look below the waterline of the iceberg at the "Bigger Iranian Picture." That includes 1) the CIA's evaluation of "Iran's ambition to take control of the Persian Gulf region" (Baer 2008, 78), 2) since the 1979 the Islamic Revolution an Empire is in the making by proxy where Iran tends to export its version of Islamism throughout the region and beyond, 3) the quest for a Shia territorial imperative from Teheran to Beirut that has been attained due to the removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq, the Arab Spring in Syria and proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, 4) direct acts of terror and violence against the countries and people in region for example Israel by proxies for example Hezbollah and involvement in the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, 5) Iran's long range missile program where it could reach targets in Europe, 6) ongoing cyber-attacks against Israel and others, 7) maritime attacks on Israeli operated merchant ships and American naval vessels in the Persian Gulf, and 8) and the ongoing uranium enrichment program that could lead to a nuclear weapon. Each in its own right might be a challenge but when combined show "The Clear and Present Danger of a Major Iranian Threat."

Options to tackle the Iranian Threat

What then are the options of dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat? These are the same options that have been on the table since 2006, but none have really worked because the Iranian threat is still with the world! The first option for example is economic and other sanctions but these are not efficacious. They have not worked with Iran. They have not strangled the Iran nuclear threat in the last 30 years. They have had crippling impacts on the ordinary Iranian people who have not risen against the regime to topple it.

The second option is military force. However American and NATO forces have not fixed Afghanistan or Iraq and have not been able operate in tribal areas in Pakistan, so why should they be able to succeed in Iran? Any future military option against Iran could have two variations. Firstly, pinpoint targeting of the Iranian nuclear sites but these may not succeed 100% and may only delay the inevitable of a new Iranian nuclear program. Secondly a regime changes in Teheran but this is likely to plunge the country and region into chaos, as happened with Iraq in 2003. It would also be hard to get the world including China and Russia and others on board for any military strike against Iran.

The third option is Containment, a traditional and acceptable act in the international system, but not always successful. For example, Barry R. Posen, Professor of Political Science at the MIT has been asking since 2006 "Can We Live with a Nuclear Iran? Can deterrence and containment work?" He notes "as we contemplate the actions, including war, that the United States and its allies might take to forestall a nuclear Iran, we need to coolly assess whether and how such a spectre might be deterred and contained" (New York Times 2006, A19).

Containment would include surrounding Iran with nuclear states lead by the United States including its naval forces stationed in the region. Well that already exists and is not working. Iran is surrounded by large American military forces in the region, by Israel (with alleged nuclear war heads and not a signatory to the NPT) and by Pakistan and India (both nuclear armed states and not signatories to the NPT). Yet this has not slowed (Contained) the Iranian missile and uranium enrichment programs. So, Iran has not yet been Contained.

The fourth option is Deterrence that is a Cold War theory and practice. It is when rationale leaders stop short of doing something because of the consequences. Juan Cole (University of Michigan) in

2009 said of this “Iran’s leadership is seeking what is sometimes called the ‘Japan Option’ or a “rapid breakout capability’ (nuclear latency)” (Cole 2009, 43).

I as author of this article agree with Cole and go further. I say that unlike North Korea, India, and Pakistan who have nuclear weapons, Tehran on the other hand genuinely does not want to actually construct and detonate a nuclear device. I believe until now that Iran’s nuclear policy is more of an exercise in deterrence than it is an offensive move. The Iranian threat is Iran’s deterrence of others. That means by threatening to enrich uranium and make a nuclear bomb senior Iranian leaders are invited to negotiate internationally and do so to avoid heavier sanctions against Iran and to also show the world that their threat is still there. This I say that this is the Iranian version of the Cold War Deterrence. Until now Iranian has not really wanted a nuclear weapon as it might have to actually use it and is feared that others might then use nuclear weapons against Iran.

Let’s look at this in more detail. Iran has never developed a command-and-control structure for nuclear weapons. There is no clear strategy for having them as a military tool, for example as existed in the Cold War with the NATO Triad of Forces in a model of escalation. I say then that for Iran their nuclear threat is a political weapon and not a military weapon.

However, this may not always be the case. There are divisions among Iranian policymakers. That is a real possibility in the international system when a domestic regime or leader is replaced by another. Currently all political power truly rests with the Ayatollah. Others such as the Presidents jockey. For example, President Rafsanjani, rebuked President Ahmadinejad for playing “nuclear chicken,” meaning jeopardizing Iran’s international negotiating leverage. He said “We possess nuclear technology that is not operationalized yet. Any time we decide to weaponize it, we can do so rather quickly” (Rafsanjani 2005).

Iranian threat perceptions

Any change from a threat of building a nuclear weapon to a threat of using a nuclear weapon will come from Iranian threat perceptions. That is a change from using a nuclear weapon as a political tool to that of using a nuclear weapon as a military tool. That makes the single most important driving force in Iran’s nuclear calculus is its threat perception. Times have not changed and this is an old story as well.

Back in 2009 Entessar wrote “According to the Shah, Iran did not fear an attack from the Soviet Union, but rather from Afghanistan and Iraq acting as proxies for Soviet aggression. To counter this threat, the Shah told Eisenhower that Iran needed a ‘crash program’ to obtain highly mobile forces with atomic weapons.” (Entessar 2009, 43). Eisenhower was the American president in 1950s!

Professor Nasser Hadian, a political scientist at Tehran University has drawn the historical line from then to the 1980s by writing “Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution ‘Iran’s strategic loneliness’ has continued. The Iraq-Iran war placed Iraq at the fore of the perception of the threat” (Hadian 2019). Post Iraq war the threat perception became Sunni for example Saudi Arabia and that is also an existential one. The story has not changed as the current view is that the single most important driving force in Iran’s nuclear calculus is still its threat perception. And the story has not changed that no-one, but no-one has stopped Iran from using this nuclear threat.

The threat has been around so long, many leaders around the world have voiced it and the mass and social media have covered the story like a never-ending soap opera. Public opinion surveys have conducted to examine how real it is. For example, two were conducted by Stanford University, one before and one after the November 2020 American Presidential elections. Before them 51.4% and after them 66.6% of those surveyed said that the Iranian nuclear program posed a threat.

Pew Research conducted a public opinion survey in nine countries (United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Greece, Poland, Czech Republic and Russia). It found as a median of global threats Iran's nuclear program was placed at 56% second only to 'international financial instability' that was at 63% and just ahead of 'Islamic extremist groups' at 55%. It is fair to say then that people believe that the Iranian nuclear threat is real.

Conclusions

In democratic states when leaders believe that the public has an interest in an issue then they also have an interest in the same issue. Maybe their interest in an issue is why the public also have an interest in the same issue. With such a coalesce of interests, in the last week of August 2021 the newly elected Prime Minister Bennet of Israel visited the newly elected President Biden in the United States, while newly elected President Ebrahim Raisi in Iran continued to threaten.

The former two leaders agreed and told the world at a joint press conference that Iran would never have a nuclear weapon. Maybe the third leader also agreed because so long as his threat of having one achieved its objective, he would not actually have to have one.

The bottom line is that the Iranian Nuclear Threat is Iranian Deterrence. It is the threat of acquiring a nuclear weapon, but not actually threatening anyone by testing one or by aiming one at anyone. Is it fair to say when revisiting the Iranian nuclear threat prompted by new leaders in America, Israel and Iran to say, "I promise that the Iranian nuclear threat is real this time?"

Only time will tell because sometimes leaders don't act rationally. Maybe Raisi will build the nuclear bomb that he is threatening to. Maybe Biden and Bennet will decide on a pre-emptive preventive military strike against Iranian enrichment facilities. And then the world will never be the same again! One issue remains and that is the Iranian Question. Iran continues to support violent and extremist terror groups for example Hezbollah, to intervene in the affairs of other countries for example Syria and Yemen, and to engage in cyber and maritime attacks. What will Biden and Bennet and others in the P5+1 do about this?

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