STRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES
OF A NUCLEAR IRAN

Henry H. Gaffney, Lucio Martino and Daniel J. Whiteneck

In the troubled Middle East, beset by the continuing war in Iraq, stalled Middle East peace, and extremist Islamic terrorists lurking in both the Middle East and adjacent areas, including Europe, it would seem that the last thing the world needs is an Iran equipped with nuclear weapons. It would seem to be a new destabilizing element. On one hand, Iran’s proliferation seems inevitable, given the intransigent view of a theocratic government that is ever more entrenched in power. On the other, nuclear weapons are very unusable weapons, especially if a country has just a few and given America’s overwhelming nuclear superiority, plus Israel’s possession of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, despite piling up billions of dollars as oil prices rise, Iran’s economy is precarious, with high unemployment and a restless population, and they can ill-afford to cut themselves off from the world unless China offers an alternative globalization as it were.

Whatever the case, both the Middle East and Europe, as well as the United States, while busy fending off the terrorists on one hand and attending to their own economic stability and growth in the globalized economy, must now struggle with the nuclear potential of a long-hostile Iran. It need not be so, since Iran is a self-contained nation of a distinct national character, with firm borders, not inclined to attack its neighbors, though it has toyed with terrorism and fomenting Islamic revolutions, albeit at a declining rate. The challenge for the West in the coming years will be to contain a nuclear-armed Iran while slowly inducing it to provide for its people through connections to the global economy. The West can hardly begin, though, until the situation next door in Iraq is settled down and its stability and new character are established.

AN ASSESSMENT

It is estimated by Western sources that it will take Iran another ten years before it has enough fissile material—presumably highly enriched uranium, but plutonium is not ruled out for they may also be building reactors as well as centrifuges—to assemble into nuclear weapons. They seem well on their way to doing so. Their program is of long duration and has been greatly helped by the illicit transfers of equipment, technology, and designs by A. Q. Khan of Pakistan. Assembling weapons is not so easy, especially without testing, though
they might go without testing, like Israel, or wait, like Pakistan following India. Mating nuclear weapons to missiles is also not easy, but they are developing the Shehab-3 with North Korean help. Rumors also indicate some non-governmental Russian help. One would not be surprised if China were also not helping on the missiles, but we have no reports on that. Neither Russia nor China thinks proliferation is a good thing.

So, there is much time and diplomacy that must pass, but none of the signs are encouraging. Iran seems determined to “go nuclear,” and it does not appear that there is any way to buy them off. Their plan is a nuclear energy program for the time they run out of gas and oil and, in the interim, to maximize their exports of oil and gas and thus their hard currency income. In addition to the Bushehr reactor (which by the way is located right on the Gulf coast, for access to cooling water, and thus vulnerable), they talk of buying another ten reactors from Russia. They can’t possibly fuel all of those from their own resources (and the rods for Bushehr are being furnished by Russia). It seems that Iran does not appreciate all the difficulties ahead—indications of a very closed elite and decision-making process.

If they do “go nuclear,” Iran is likely to produce only limited numbers of warheads and missiles. They would be in a position to strike any country in the region, including Israel. They are unlikely to have ICBMs that can reach the U.S., but the evolution of their missiles may enable them to reach Europe. They can hardly match the nuclear capabilities of the United States.

They might never admit they have a nuclear weapons capability. Once they achieve the capability, they would have to break several taboos: testing, no-first use, declaring that they are not targeting anything in particular. They would be likely to have a deterrence policy. They can break the taboos, of course, but so then could everyone else. It is not clear that they have considered any of these questions, so the outside world would need to warn them of the dangers they face if they proceed, especially that they become a target in retaliation.

Why do we in the West (not Russia or China, apparently) worry so much about a nuclear Iran? Aren’t they a relatively peaceful and secure state, not likely to attack another state? The first answer is that the region, while much of it is relatively stable, is subject to drastic and violent change in the coming years. Iraq is already in turmoil. Syria is in deep trouble after they assassinated Hariri in Lebanon and has an incompetent government. It is hard to believe the Saudi system can survive the increasing impingement of the outside world. Pakistan could descend into chaos. Iran may well fear even more Western intrusion, like the U.S. in Iraq, in the coming years. Or they may see opportunities for themselves to gain more influence and even impose a new caliphate.

Why they should feel confident about doing these things because they have a few nuclear weapons and yet no real conventional forces is a mystery. In any
case, the West wouldn’t care if most of the world’s oil reserves weren’t in the area. But the West fear the disruption of oil supplies—and yet over the next ten years the demand for oil is likely to outstrip supply. The match between demand and supply is too neatly balanced at the moment and any disruption, as demonstrated by the impact of the hurricanes in the U.S., has immediate economic consequences that are not so easily rolled back. Another factor is that we could see a huge split in the more advanced world, back into competitive blocs. That is, the United States, Europe, Russia, India, and China could all go separate ways. We already see Russia and China and soon India ready to make deals with the devil.

SCENARIOS

The West will respond to either an inevitable evolution or the achievement of a nuclear armed-Iran in a very predictable fashion that will embroil the rest of the world as well depending on how the following strategies will be enforced:

1. Acquiescence.
2. Economic sanctions and Containment.
3. Deterrence.
4. Preemptive attack—better described as aggressive prevention.

"Acquiescence"

Acquiescence means admitting Iran to the nuclear club, like Israel, India, and Pakistan (none of them signers of the NPT). For its part, the U.S., as the only real guarantor of continued stability in the region, would feel vulnerable. It would not want to be dictated to on oil, threats to Israel, assistance to terrorists, etc., by a nuclear Iran. Iran would be greatly enabled to expand and make more sophisticated its nuclear weapons capabilities as all the merchants of death surface to legitimacy and flock to Iran to sell their evil goods. Acquiescence doesn’t sound like a good option.

"Sanctions and Containment"

Sanctions could really hurt Iran, even if the world still lets their oil flow (which it must, unfortunately). Sanctions forced Libya to give up its aspirations for weapons of mass destruction and missiles on which to deliver them, but it was a weak, small country, and Qaddafi’s people were getting restless under the deprivations sanctions inflicted on them. Sanctions actually worked on Iraq—again to the great detriment of the people, but also leaving Iraq essentially defenseless after its devastating loss to the allied coalition in 1991. But they would have to be under UN authority, and it is not clear that Russia and China and now India would not veto any such resolution or cheat on any agreements. They
want to be able to sell to Iran and want in turn some kind of favorable access to their oil and gas, as well as being able to build pipelines across Iranian territory. Containment means surrounding Iran with military force in some way. Around the world, it is known that containment, led by the U.S., brought down the Soviet Union. To threaten China with containment is to send them into agonies of insecurity. Containment means giving Iran no opportunity to dictate regional affairs. It means close relations with between the nations of the West and the other local countries. It also means that the U.S. must ensure a stable and favorable outcome in Iraq, which means a longer stay for the U.S. there. After all, the U.S. contained the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-1988 and Iran has been contained on both sides by the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan for the last three years. Containment certainly means that any military action by Iran would be swiftly countered. The last time they attacked the U.S. Navy, in 1987-1988, when were escorting reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, Iran lost its navy.

“Deterrence”

Deterrence is a little narrower than containment in concept (the two concepts got confused in the Cold War). It means, “Welcome to the nuclear club: you are now a target—you are subject to retaliation if you were ever to use a single nuclear weapon, and we can evaporate you.” Iran can threaten more limited retaliation itself if they were to take other aggressive action in the region. It remains to be seen whether the security they think they gain with a nuclear capability makes them more aggressive, though.

“The last alternative”

The last alternative is “disarmament under extreme prejudice” by forceful means, in accordance with the Bush II Administration’s “preemption policy” (actually a prevention policy, not “leaping to take a first step under imminent threat” in the classic meaning of preemption). This policy was stated in a rather extreme chapter in an otherwise conventional U.S. national security strategy issued in 2002. It may have been a one-off policy, to be applied only to Iraq, but it has stricken fear around the world. The trouble with preemption on Iranian nuclear facilities are that (a) air strikes to take out Iranian nuclear facilities appear to be infeasible (and are generally dismissed by U.S. Republicans as something President Clinton did and thus ineffectual), and (b) the U.S. ground forces are exhausted by Iraq and, in any case, Iran is a far larger country with a more complex ground for ground forces to traverse than Iraq. Iran and Europeans may fear an adventure by the Bush Administration of that sort, but it is unlikely in any case.
CONCLUSION

At this point, altogether, it looks like Iran is on an inevitable course to at least have enriched uranium and very likely to attempt to build nuclear weapons that could be mounted as warheads on their Shehab-3 missiles. It also means, their relative isolation by most of the rest of the world and thus an inability to join the global economy in any broader way that could provide employment to its people. That in turn means an unhappy, subdued population, which they are already feeling as the regime conservatives snuff out the political freedoms that had been beginning to appear. It is likely that all the regime can promise them if it continues on the nuclear path is “let them eat nukes and oil.”

But it also means that the West, particularly the United States, will have to continue to take an active role in the Gulf region and throughout the Middle East—which may or may not aggravate the problem of global extremist Islamic terrorism, depending on whether progress in politics and economics can be achieved in the other countries. This is too bad. However world opinion may cling to the old Soviet propaganda that all the U.S. wants to do is create bases all around the world, we really want to go home.

In the end, though, Iran is not about to destroy the West (Europe and the United States, and Israel), nor is the West going to destroy Iran. Neither side can “win” with nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons do not become any more usable simply because one side of the other has it. In the interim, though, we are going to see a lot of politics, a lot of instability, the aggravation of terrorism, and other disturbing events, before we can say some new order will have been established. We had hoped that globalization as economics, in a way that provided better lives for most humankind, would resolve many of these issues and instabilities. At the moment, that is not so clear, as disintegrative tendencies seem predominant.

American would prefer that the countries there live in peace with each other, at peace with the whole world, and to connect to the global economy so that their people can prosper. Nuclear weapons do not serve these purposes at all.