

An Iran with Nuclear Weapons

presented by

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1. Nearly all studies focus on efforts to prevent or halt Iranian nuclear weapons development and deployment.
2. We seek to end Iranian enrichment and stop Iranian reprocessing.
3. Despite these efforts, Iran moves ever closer to a nuclear weapons capability, with speculation about when Iran will be able to build a nuclear warhead or deploy an assembled nuclear weapon. The controversial CIA Intelligence Estimate of 2007 did little to clarify this situation.
4. I have worked with my IFPA colleague Dr. Jacquelyn Davis on a study that looks instead at what would be the nature of an Iran with nuclear weapons. The full report is available on the IFPA website, www.ifpa.org. In doing this study we assumed that, despite the many international efforts, Iran has nevertheless emerged as a nuclear weapons possessor. We asked what kinds of political-military issues and planning challenges a nuclear-armed Iran might pose for the United States and for countries in the region surrounding Iran and for the broader international security setting.
5. In order to think more precisely about how a nuclear Iran might act, we developed three heuristic models:
 - A. A defensive Iran
 - B. An aggressive Iran
 - C. An unstable Iran

And now a few words about each of these models:

- The defensive-Iran model assumes a commitment to a minimum nuclear deterrence posture. If we must contemplate a nuclear Iran, this would obviously be the best from our perspective.
 - Iran would deploy a nuclear force that is small and whose principal objective would be to deter an attack on Iran;
 - Perhaps there would be an Iranian declaratory policy that specified the conditions under which Iran would use or threaten to use nuclear weapons;
 - For example, this might mean retaliatory use against a conventional or nuclear attack against Iran;
 - In such a model the Iranian nuclear weapons would be dispersed and concealed in order to enhance their survival potential and to discourage preemptive attacks against them;
 - Although it would be inherently defensive, this Iranian nuclear capability would nevertheless confront the U.S. with the need to reassure allies in the region and also allies in Europe, since Iran is developing longer-range nuclear-capable missiles. Iran would have the capability, if not the interest, to threaten its neighbors and others. It would pose problems for U.S. extended security guarantees and assurances.

- An aggressive -Iran model postulates a situation in which Iran, backed by its nuclear weapons, aspires to a greater leadership role in the wider Middle East:
 - Nuclear weapons would embolden Iran to pursue a more active foreign policy in and beyond the Middle East;
 - This might (but would not necessarily) include transfer of nuclear capabilities to an ally such as Syria or to proxy forces (Hezbollah), and perhaps stepped-up assistance to more distant allies. Chavez in Venezuela comes readily to mind. Allies of Iran would have greater freedom of action if they believed that there was an Iranian nuclear umbrella that included them;
 - The United States would have greater difficulty deterring Iranian conventional or unconventional operations if Iran possessed nuclear weapons;
 - Under this model Iran would gain unprecedented freedom of action in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, including especially maritime operations and possibly even military operations against its Gulf neighbors;

- An aggressive-Iran model would also lead Teheran to place great emphasis on a more robust and diversified nuclear weapons capability than in the first model. This might also include space assets, and the ability to launch short-range missiles from ships operating off our coast;
 - This model would embolden Iran in its dealings with neighbors such as Saudi Arabia. This model would also have the potential to destabilize Iraq if Iran chose to assert itself in Iraq, backed by a nuclear-weapons capability designed to deter US. military response against Iran, especially after U.S. withdrawal from Iraq; and
 - This model would also have major consequences for U.S. extended security guarantees and could lead to a cascade toward additional nuclear powers in states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.
- Our third model is an unstable Iran, in which there is a state-collapse scenario:
 - One faction or another gains control of Iran’s nuclear weapons;
 - Iran’s nuclear weapons support a radical Islamist agenda and such weapons are transferred to Hezbollah or even fall into al-Qaeda hands;
 - This model poses the greatest proliferation threat because the world’s most dangerous weapons might fall into the hands of the world’s most dangerous actors;
 - Deterring regime elements in possession of nuclear weapons from transferring them or even using them would become an important focus for the U.S.;
6. To summarize: A nuclear-armed Iran would pose essentially three types of operational planning challenges for the United States. To varying degrees they are present in each of the models:
- Countering the potential for actual use of Iranian nuclear weapons against allies, U.S. forces in the region, against allies outside the region, and against the U.S. itself;
 - Countering the use of Iranian conventional forces under the protection of Iran’s nuclear umbrella;
 - Countering the transfer of nuclear weapons to terrorist groups and their possible use by such groups;

7. In order to address these challenges:

- The United States will need to develop deterrence forces that include offensive and defensive – including punishment and denial, asking what is the 21st-century role of U.S. nuclear and conventional deterrence and missile defense;
- The United States will need to rethink the basis for extended deterrence or otherwise face the prospect of cascading proliferation;
- We will need to consider the potential afforded to a nuclear Iran for pursuing asymmetrical strategies such as an EMP attack launched to explode a nuclear weapon at an altitude that would disable our electronic systems;
- We will need to consider the implications, especially of models 2 and 3, for homeland security and specifically nuclear use within the United States; and
- We will need to think more fully about deterrence in a setting, especially models 2 and 3, in which deterrence by the threat of punishment or retaliation may not be effective.
- We will need to give greater priority to attribution, forensics, and intelligence. All of this, of course, will require cooperation and sharing of information among allies and coalition partners.
- We will need to focus efforts on bilateral relations with key countries in the region, including discussions about requirements for extended deterrence and consultations on other security issues and cooperative arrangements as well.