

Make no mistake, the Iranians will have their nuclear way

Hugh White

The Age

6 December 2011

P. 11

Western leaders talk big about Iran's nuclear ambitions being "unacceptable". But what they say makes little difference. The Iranians really want nuclear weapons, and the rest of the world has no credible way to stop them. We are going to see a nuclear-armed Iran whether we like it or not. The challenge now is to work out what that means, and what we should do about it.

Last week's storming of the British embassy in Tehran reminded us how hard Iran is to deal with. Meanwhile, last month's report by the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed that Iran is perfecting the design of a nuclear weapon as well as producing the enriched uranium needed to make it. Iran is well on the way.

It is not hard to see why Iran wants nuclear weapons. One reason is fear. Iran lives in a fractious region surrounded by nuclear-armed neighbours — Russia to the north, China to the north-east, Pakistan and India to the east, Israel to the west. And, of course, Tehran fears America, and perhaps believes that nuclear weapons will help it avoid the fate of Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

But besides fear there are also ambition and pride. Iranians see themselves as heirs to a great civilisation, and the Middle East's natural leader. They see nuclear weapons as both the necessary instrument and the natural prerogative of a great regional power. Why, they ask, should India and Pakistan be accepted as nuclear powers and not Iran?

It is a fair question.

Fear, ambition and pride is a potent mix of motives. It does not justify Iran's nuclear program, but it does explain why its government is so committed to it, and why so many Iranians across the political spectrum support it. And it explains why even the tougher economic sanctions now being enforced are unlikely to change Iranian minds.

With sanctions failing, someone — presumably Israel or America or both — appears to be trying sabotage of critical machinery and assassination of key personnel to slow Iran's nuclear program. No doubt this is causing distress, delays and expense. But the chances of stopping the program this way, or delaying it by more than a few months, are very slender.

This is why talk keeps coming back to military options. It is tempting to believe that if diplomacy or dirty tricks fail, armed force offers a swift, effective option. But this is an illusion. No credible military option offers even a modest chance of stopping Iran's nuclear program, and little prospect even of slowing it down significantly.

The uranium enrichment plants at the heart of Iran's program are easy to hide and easy to protect by burying them deep underground. Neither Israel nor America can be confident they could find enough of Iran's' critical nuclear infrastructure to make any significant difference to its weapons program, or destroy it once they had found it. The most they could realistically expect is to set Iran back a few months or perhaps a year.

This meagre gain has to be weighed against Iran's ability to retaliate. It has many ways to hit back against America and Israel. Serious voices in both countries caution that the cost-benefit analysis simply doesn't add up.

So it is time to stop talking about how to stop Iran getting nuclear weapons, and start asking what it means when they do. The consequences will spread wider as Iran builds bigger, longer-range missiles, but the first and greatest consequences will be in Iran's neighbourhood, especially for Israel.

The most obvious danger is in fact the least likely. Nuclear deterrence ensures that Iran is extremely unlikely simply to launch a direct nuclear attack on Israel. Iran's leaders know Iran would simply then be destroyed by a massive Israeli nuclear retaliation — and if the Israelis didn't get them, America would. Moreover, Washington will extend a similar deterrent umbrella over any of Iran's other neighbours who feel directly threatened by nuclear attack.

So the more important effect of Tehran's bomb will be indirect — in the way it shifts the conventional balance of forces in the region. With its own nuclear umbrella, Iran will be much less fearful of attack by its neighbours, and much more willing to use its conventional forces to attack them. Moreover, Washington will be much less likely to intervene. So with nuclear weapons, Iran will stand a much better chance of realising its age-old ambition to dominate the Gulf.

The other big effect of an Iranian bomb will be to neutralise Israel's nuclear advantage. For decades, Israel has known that if it ever faced defeat on the battlefield, it could stop an invasion by threatening its attackers with nuclear strikes. This threat has been credible as long as Israel has been the region's only nuclear power. It will stop being credible when Iran can threaten nuclear strike against Israel in retaliation. Then Israel's survival in a war will again depend on its tank brigades, and they cannot hold back its enemies forever.

All this points to a very uncomfortable conclusion. As Iran becomes stronger, it becomes more important for those with vital interests in the Middle East to get along with it. For America, a stable long-term future for the Gulf is going to be impossible unless the US and Iran can get on better together. That means giving Iran more political space. Not easy.

For Israel, it means all the compelling arguments against compromise with its neighbours run up against the cold, unsentimental logic of power. Iran's nuclear program is just one, very important, reflection of the fact that time is not on Israel's side.

Hugh White is professor of strategic studies at ANU and a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute.