The Iranian Nuclear programme: Impact on Regional Stability and Security

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Introduction

The Iranian nuclear programme has surfaced as one of the chief security, political and diplomatic challenges of the 21st century. Undoubtedly, the Iranian nuclear programme would 'throw existing security structures into flux' causing a 'fundamental rethink in regional strategic alignments' (Kaye and Wehrey, 2007, p. 120). Nuclear Iran is likely to complicate an already intricate geopolitical orientation of the Middle East, whose history has been mired in conflicts, distrust and a range of other integrated factors. In the region, Iran's nuclear programme has caused serious anxiety among its neighbouring states, particularly Arab GCC states and Israel (Ehteshami, 2010). Kaye and Wehrey (2007, p. 125) argue that reactions from neighbouring states span a broad spectrum, ranging from 'accommodation and detente to outright hostility and opposition' including 'efforts to acquire a countervailing [nuclear] deterrent'. Undeniably, the complexity of forming cooperative security structures in the Middle East cannot be neglected.

There are many prevailing uncertainties. Whether Iran's nuclear programme has an actual military dimension remains uncertain and hypothetical (Khan, 2009). Undeniably, suspicions of an ambiguous and aggressive Iranian foreign policy and nuclear programme have 'sharply increased regional tensions' (Gasiorowsky, 2007, p. 125) despite Iran's persistent claims that its nuclear programme is for peaceful energy purposes (Khan, 2010).

In the world of academia, scholars have tried to elucidate the Iranian nuclear programme and its possible impact on regional stability and on that of the world at large by presenting empirical evidence and making strong theoretical representations. On one hand, it is widely believed that nuclear weapons kept the peace and stability between the US and the USSR during the long conflict of the cold war era. On the other hand, however, it is also believed that proliferation of nuclear weapons is dangerous and could cause further instability. In Middle Eastern perspective, some prominent scholars believe that further spread of nuclear weapons would have a stabilizing impact on the Middle East (Waltz, 1981; Mearsheimer, 1990).

However, their optimistic observation could hardly escape criticism where numbers of prominent scholars have argued that nuclear deterrence and proliferation of nuclear weapons may not be stabilizing effects or cause stability in specific regional settings (Sagan, 1994; Dunn, 1991; Kaiser, 1989 and Miller, 1993). Given the complex and combustible nature of the Middle East geo-political and geo-strategic situation, this paper argues that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons or continues its course in their pursuit, it will have serious implications not only for the regional stability but also for the world, at large.

In order to build on the more compelling reasoning that Iran's nuclear programme is a liability for regional stability, this essay first discusses the logic of deterrence theory, which suggests that the Iranian nuclear programme would have a stabilizing impact on the region. Second, the essay builds on its major argument that deterrence theory is unlikely to work in the Middle East due to a number of different reasons which support proliferation in this area. Following on from this, the behaviour of the GCC states, which deem Iran an enemy and consider a nuclear Iran a threat to their stability and geopolitical interests, is discussed. Next, this paper argues that a balance of power between Iran and Israel would create a security dilemma between Iran and the GCC states, thus producing more

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power struggles and instability. Further, the reasoning behind allowing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region (if Iran were to acquire them) is considered. Connected with this development is the logic of multipolarity, which inherently, is considered more conflict prone and contains higher probability of miscalculation. Finally, this paper delves into the prospects of an Israeli pre-emptive strike on Iran, which given Israel's historic behaviour and policy posture, cannot be ruled out. It is argued that whether a conventional strike or nuclear, it would have devastating impacts on the region. The paper concludes by summarizing all the arguments.

Nuclear Deterrence Theory and the Middle East

Before moving towards the more compelling logic of proliferation and its consequences, it is pertinent to examine the logic of nuclear deterrence theory. According to this, a mutual nuclear deterrence promotes stability, avoids escalation of hostilities, restores balance and averts miscalculation that could convert to a nuclear war (Feldman, 1982). The idea of nuclear deterrence is primarily associated with Waltz who is the chief proponent of the theory of nuclear deterrence and weapons spread, and from the Waltz perspective, the impact of proliferation would be less menacing than is usually believed (Waltz, 1981). From a Middle Eastern perspective, Waltz contends that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it would have stabilizing effects on the region. Waltz is very forceful in making this argument by saying that if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons it 'would probably be the best possible result: the one likely to restore stability to the Middle East' (Waltz, 2012, p. 1).

Bader (1968) argues that in order to continue the flexibility needed to correct the arms imbalance in one region, the provision of nuclear weapons to one or more antagonists may have stabilizing impacts on any region. In a similar vein Waltz (2012, p. 2) argues that 'power begs to be balanced' and it is the military imbalance between Iran and Israel that has caused the instability. It is inferred that the logic of a deterrence and proliferation optimism position flows from the assumptions of rational deterrence theory (Sagan, 1994). From this perspective, if Iran becomes a nuclear power, the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) could restore a balance between Iran and Israel as it is universally believed that it was nuclear weapons and the MAD situation, not treaties, which kept the long peace between the two super powers during the Cold War (Sirimarco, 2005, p. 25). Similarly, this can offer a stable balance in the Middle East. Waltz (1981) argues that nuclear weapons are the weapons of de-escalation rather than escalation and instability. This judgement stresses that nuclear deterrence could work between Iran and Israel and it would restrain both from escalating any conflict to a nuclear level because of the potential devastation these weapons could unleash. De Mesquita and Riker (1982, p. 291) argue that the 'presence of an explicit or underlying nuclear threat constrains conflict by reducing its likelihood of escalating into nuclear war'. According to the proponents of nuclear proliferation, particularly Waltz (1981), even the proliferation of nuclear weapons is better. While arguing this, advocates of nuclear deterrence downplay the negative impacts of nuclear proliferation in general and particularly in the case of the Middle East. Whilst arguing that nuclear deterrence between Israel and Iran could stabilize the region, they overlook other geopolitical realities, the region's complexities, and concerns connected with nuclear proliferation, all of which could become more dangerous if Iran continues its nuclear drive or actually acquires nuclear capability. Moreover, the limitations to deterrence theory between Iran and Israel in the Middle East are amplified because of a number of reasons for proliferation which operate independently of deterrence theory assumptions (Hagerty, 1998).

Reasons for Proliferation and its Likely Impacts

Reasons for proliferation are more compelling according to which deterrence is unlikely to work in the Middle East. As Miller (1993, p. 69) argues 'the proposition that nuclear weapons promote peace and stability is properly regarded not as a fact but as an interpretation, largely based on the evidence of a single case'. Dunn (1982) argues that many of the technical, political and situational roots of stable nuclear deterrence may be lacking in the Middle East where there is a high probability of nuclear weapons being used. He further contends that the heightened 'stakes and lessened room for manoeuvre in conflict-prone regions, the volatile leadership and more regional instability' all undermine the credibility of deterrence (Dunn, 1982, p. 75).

Posen (1991) in his theoretical model of inadvertent escalation contends that the phenomenon of war, behaviour of military organizations, and the security dilemma, which exists even in nuclear parity, are a cause of frustration. In the

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nuclear realm, the case of Pakistan and India is pertinent to support the case of inadvertent escalation: Pakistan fought the Kargil war with India under a nuclear weapons umbrella which could have inadvertently or accidentally escalated into a nuclear war (Betts, Sagan and Waltz, 2007). Similarly, Rajhaven (2001, p. 83) contends that 'Kargil indicated that armed with nuclear weapons, Pakistan has augmented confidence that it could raise the conflict thresholds with India'. While many have argued that nuclear weapons kept peace during the Cold War, there is a growing body of literature that shows there were many nuclear security lapses between the US and the USSR which could have caused accidents (Sagan, 1993).

Snyder's (1961) stability–instability paradox, which emphasizes that a limited conventional war is possible under the presence of nuclear weapons, is a huge risk where conflict could accidentally turn into a nuclear one. Along the same lines Waltz contends that under the stability–instability paradox nuclear weapons 'tempt countries to fight small wars' (Kapur, 2007, p. 36); but as Nye (1987) argues, in the complex domain of international relations it is not surprising that the power of theories is constrained and any minor escalation could turn a conventional conflict into a nuclear one. From this perspective, as in South Asia, the situation in the Middle East is far from stable and could lead inadvertently to a nuclear escalation during a conventional conflict between Iran and Israel. Gompert (1977, p. 146) warns that in a potential conventional conflict, actors may 'assemble their nuclear weapons in the heat of conflict', with disastrous consequences. Mearsheimer (1993, p. 51), an advocate of nuclear deterrence, even concedes that 'widespread proliferation increases the chances of accidents and nuclear terrorism'. Nuclear accidents and unauthorized nuclear use are more likely to happen in a more proliferated nuclear and unstable regional setting (Hagerty, 1998).

Another chief critique of the Waltz nuclear deterrence theory is Sagan's (1994) organization theory which emphasizes the dangers posed by the behaviour of military organizations and their interests, and the lack of adequate civilian control which could cause the deterrence failures. Sagan's theory further stresses the importance of misunderstanding, misinformation and misconstruing of information (Krieger, 2000). As Weltman (1981) concedes 'hostilities involving nuclear weapons may occur prior to the lapse of enough time for a mutually stable weapons posture to develop' and the absence of effective communication systems may cause misunderstanding between the actors. For deterrence to work, it is pertinent that each state has the second strike capability, long flight times and hotline communication systems to avoid miscalculation, which were salient between the US and the USSR during the Cold War and are completely missing in the Middle Eastern (Iran–Israel) region (Edelman, Krepinevich and Montgomery, 2011). In the Middle Eastern context, Iran and Israel's trust deficit and almost zero communication structures make this grave possibility more likely.

Another impetus to nuclear instability is the potentially disastrous timing of proliferation (Hegerty, 1998). Even Waltz (1981) agrees that 'the timing of nuclear spread in regions of chronic political turmoil may lead to instability'. Many analysts believe that potential nuclear powers may have a very short time to assimilate their nuclear weapons into 'military forces and doctrines before conflicts erupt that will make nuclear learning impossible' (Hagerty, 1998, p. 65).All these complexities of Middle Eastern strategic order make the likelihood of a workable deterrence highly questionable, and failures rather more likely. Moreover, Iran's nuclear drive is likely to create more security dilemmas rather than a balance of power in the Middle East.

Bilateral Deterrence Between Iran and Israel Could Create Another Security Dilemma

Another argument that purports stability through bilateral deterrence between Iran and Israel ignores Iran's rivalry and hostility with other GCC Arabs states, particularly Saudi Arabia, which can generate a security dilemma via-s-via Iran, hence more power struggles and instability.

As Nye (1987, p. 380) maintains, 'a balance of power is essential but difficult to maintain' and further argues that in an 'anarchic world states vie for power in the context of intense security dilemma' according to which the defensive posturing of one appears offensive to another, and therefore incites escalation (Jervis, 1978). Iran's rivalry with the GCC Arab states is independent of its rivalry with Israel and the US because of different ideological, ethnic and geopolitical reasons and it adds fears that 'Iran's nuclear ambition would trigger a spate of nuclear proliferation across the Middle East' (Mabon, 2013, p. 209). Interestingly, Waltz (2010) calls for a nuclear balance of power

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between Iran and Israel and doesn't discuss other imbalances it could generate between Iran and other regional states. Ehteshami (2010) argues that 'Iran's strategic rise exposes it to classic counterbalancing in a region such as the Middle East, in which power politics continue to dominate the region's interstate relations'. Moreover, as Walt's (1987) 'Balance of threat' theory explains, states respond to any rising power by 'balancing' against it rather than 'bandwagoning'. Walt further contends that even at the height of Pan-Arabism, balancing against Egypt was not just practised by 'conservative monarchies but even by ostensibly Pan-Arab regimes in Syria and Iraq when Nasser posed a threat to them' (Hinnebusch, 2003, p. 64). From this perspective, Arab GCC states are likely to take some countermeasures to bridge this security dilemma with Iran and perhaps the nuclear option could be the starting point.

The Middle East is different from South Asia where only two powers are major adversaries and arguably had the economic means to develop nuclear weapons. In the Middle East, the oil rich Gulf States have an abundance of economic means at their disposal to start a nuclear programme if Iran acquires nuclear weapons. Posen (1991) argues that the leaders of states often do not comprehend how aggressive their behaviour, though defensively stimulated, may appear to others. The concept of 'Balance of power' comprehends this security dilemma very well where a balance of power between Iran and Israel could generate an imbalance between Iran and the GCC Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Given Iran's historic aggressive posturing in the region, its regional ambitions and fears of the neighbours are not ill founded.

Iran's Regional Ambitions and Belligerent Behaviour

Iran's neighbours, particularly the GCC Arab states and Israel, are concerned about Iran's behaviour if it becomes a nuclear power. As Ehteshami (2010) notes, GCC states, which frequently wrangle internally, unite on the question of nuclear Iran. Iran's history with its neighbours is mired in misperceptions, political disputes, geopolitical struggles, and ideological rivalries. As Gause (2007) notes, Iran and the GCC Arab states have ideological, sectarian, and ethnic differences, and an engendered threat awareness from these perceptions puts them on a collision course rather than on the road to cooperation.

Many fear that Iran has regional ambitions and once it has gained nuclear capability it would be more aggressive and assertive as a result of this (Kaye and Wehrey, 2007). Many even argue that the Iran's nuclear programme doesn't have any credible rationale behind it and its offensive in nature. As Chubin and Litwak (2003, pp. 102–103) have argued, 'with the demise of Saddam's regime in neighbouring Iraq, an Iranian nuclear programme has lost any compelling strategic rationale'. They further argue that Iran has used Israel as a diversion and pretext in which Tehran uses its support for Palestinians to divert its neighbour's attention from its own nuclear programme (Chubin and Litwak, 2003). Ehteshami and Zweir (2007) argue that Iran's 'neocons,' who have supported Ahmadinejad's neo-revolutionary and neo-populist policies, supported by the spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, are certain that Iran should be bold and resolute in completing its historic mission to guide the region and the wider Muslim states towards a just world. Furthermore, Iran has been implicated with developing a 'Shia crescent' covering Iraq and the Levant (Ehteshami, 2010). As Ashley (2012) observes, there is a 'deeply ideological desire to become the predominant power in the region'. Moreover, Israel's strategic fears are not just voices of rhetoric but are well founded. According to Chubin and Litwak (2003, p. 103) 'Iran's quest for nuclear weapons combined with its roots of not recognizing Israel, supporting attacks against it, and seeking to derail any peace process that might be in motion, add to the concerns about Iran as a proliferator'.

The fears of Gulf States are not devoid of reality given the loss of Iraq as a Sunni Arab bulwark and Iran's consolidating influence there (Kehrey and Waye, 2007). For the Saudis, nuclear Iran is likely to intensify its Shia ascendency in Iraq and this sort of development would present an existential threat to Sunni Arab monarchies in the region (Kehrey and Waye, 2007). In this case, Saudis are willing to respond with a similar policy of exploiting cross-border tribal ties and providing financial and military support to Sunni militants in Iraq (Obaid, 2006).

The worst fear among neighbouring states is that a nuclear Iran could be more aggressive in its political and military pursuits in the region and could provide more support to its militant proxies; they could then engage with more impunity under the umbrella of Iranian nuclear weapons. To support this possible development, Sagan highlights the behaviour of Pakistan, which soon after its nuclear experiments developed a more aggressive and belligerent posture

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with regard to India, and its military backed a Jihadist incursion into the Indian-controlled Kashmir which subsequently began the Kargil War in 1999 (Sagan, Betts and Waltz, 2007). The UAE is concerned about building Iranian pressure on the disputed Gulf islands of Greater and Lesser Tumbs and Abu Musa.

Whether Iran's nuclear programme is offensive or defensive in nature, the threat perception which its neighbours are aware of is not ill founded, and even indirectly, Iran's nuclear posture is feeding its regional ambitions (Ehteshami, 2010). This would certainly lead to more nuclear proliferation in the region.

Proliferation

Proliferation of nuclear weapons is likely to take place if Iran acquires nuclear weapons in a move that would further complicate the military landscape of the region (Ehteshami, 2010). Some analysts believe that Iran's potential nuclear drive has already started a nuclear proliferation in the Middle East (Kaye and Wehrey, 2007). Many observers contend that along with the possibility of a nuclear arms race it would raise the possibility of a highly unstable regional conventional arms race (Kaye and Wehrey, 2007). In 2007, GCC representatives met with officials from the International Atomic Energy Agency to consider a preliminary study for the nuclear programme. Another danger tied to Iran's nuclear programme and further proliferation would be the question of the capability of the international community to stop further proliferation in the Middle East or globally (Lindsay and Takeyh, 2010).

The Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction, Proliferation and Terrorism, as well as other analysts, have highlighted the risk that 'even if Israel does not declare its own nuclear arsenal' proliferation is likely to happen and countries that are expected to enter the nuclear arms race are Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (Edelman, Krepinevich and Montgomery, 2011, p. 2). This would lead to a frightening crisis of both a nuclear and conventional arms race in the Middle East, a region where unstable states and violent non-state actors are rampant. Moreover, this would question the credibility and undermine the efforts of international institutions that are working to stop the spread of this doomsday weapon. This likely spread would generate a multipolar nuclear region which would be less stable than any bipolar scenario.

Multipolarity is Dangerous

Another development that further undermines any relevance of deterrence is a 'multipolar scenario' in a region where more than two states would have nuclear weapons. As Waltz argues, in the multipolar world 'who is a danger to whom and who can be expected to deal with threats and problems are matters of uncertainty' (Waltz, 1988, p. 622). He further contends that 'dangers are more diffused and miscalculations are the main source of danger' (Waltz, 1988, p. 623). As evidence shows and as discussed above, many other states (particularly Saudi Arabia), which consider Iran an independent threat, are likely to obtain nuclear weapons, and a nuclear interaction among three or more nuclear states in the region would further endanger the fragile peace. Apart from other political and security complexities, a multi-nuclear Middle East would be different from a Cold War bipolar system, where the US and the USSR were just concerned with each other (Hagerty, 1998). Multipolarity is deemed less stable because the 'coalitions can shift quickly, upsetting the balance of power and creating incentives for an attack' (Edelman, Krepinevich and Montgomery, 2011, p. 4). Adding more to these likely fears is an additional threat of a pre-emptive strike from Israel and the US.

A Possible Pre-emptive Strike from Israel

Another danger tied to Iran's nuclear programme is a possible pre-emptive strike from Israel on Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reiterated on several occasions that he would stop Iran at any cost from obtaining nuclear weapons. As Khan (2009, p. 61) argues, looking at Israel's previous attacks on Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities 'in extreme situations it is expected to attack Iran pre-emptively or preventively'. Some analysts have even argued that because of Israel's small size it is a 'one-bomb state' (Rosenbaum, 2012, p. 21) and because of Iran's large size it 'can win a nuclear war with Israel' (Parsi, p. 271). It is likely that Israeli leaders might use the 'Samson option' (Khan, 2009) and strike first because 'Israel's small size means that even a few nuclear detonations on its soil would be devastating' (Kaye and Wehrey, 2007).

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Whether the pre-emptive strike is conventional or nuclear it would have serious impacts on the region, and as the British military historian Barnett believes, 'an attack on Iran would effectively launch World War Three' (Chomasky, 2007, p. 209). Chubin and Litwak (2003, p.109) argue that the 'policy of a pre-emption strike is as problematic as any other options' and beyond the practical issues 'the political consequences of a military strike on Iran could be highly adverse' and an attack might trigger an anti-US backlash that would be bound to 'undermine prospects for near-term political change and eventual rapprochement between the US and Iran'.

As many analysts argue, a pre-emptive strike on Iran would not dismantle its nuclear programme; rather it would 'further strengthen Iran's determination to go nuclear', and would certainly trigger a costly retaliation in the Middle East politically and militarily (Edelman, Krepinevich and Montgomery, 2011, p. 6). Smaller states in the Middle East are worried about getting caught in the cross fire where Iran could attack US military bases in their countries in retaliatory attacks (Kaye and Wehrey, 2007). Analysts have repeatedly pointed to the tremendous lethality of Hizbullah, which is another element of worry if an attack happens (Sadr, 2005). Moreover, in complete absence of any dialogue or detente measures between Israel and Iran, the situation looks bleaker still and a likely pre-emptive strike on Iran would certainly have unprecedented consequences on the region's stability.

Conclusion

By considering all aspects, it is evident that Iran's nuclear programme would have very destabilizing impacts on the Middle East, particularly on the region's security. Even though Waltz's deterrence theory presents a positive outlook of Iran's nuclear programme on the region, proliferation rationales, which assume that the region would become more conflict prone if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, are more compelling. Neighbours' fears of Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions and the emergence of new security dilemmas could ignite a nuclear arms race in the region, hence more proliferation. This could lead to a multipolar regional scenario which is regarded as being highly unstable. Moreover, a complex unstable regional order, the lack of communication infrastructure between Iran and Israel, and a likely pre-emptive strike make the equation more devastating, and, perhaps, as some analysts argue, it could light up a nuclear war.

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