Dealing with a Nuclear Iran

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Abstract

There are few issues of more immediate concern to the international community than Iran’s nuclear programme. This paper assesses the behaviour and rationale of the Iranian leadership which seeks to develop not only the country’s nuclear energy capacity, but has made clear its desire to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

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Despite all of Tehran’s talk of the peaceful purposes of its nuclear programme ... Iran wants the bomb. ¹

Introduction

In March 2009, in a notable show of solidarity, China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States (US) issued a joint communication on the Iranian nuclear programme to the meeting of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In this statement, these countries expressed support for the IAEA in its efforts to resolve continuing concerns over the potential military dimensions to Iran’s nuclear programme. The statement further called on Iran to comply with the inspection requirements of the IAEA and to implement the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions regarding this programme.² Since the mid-1980s, Israel and many Western countries, particularly the US, have accused Iran of seeking a nuclear weapons capability; these accusations have become more strident since 2002 when Iran’s undeclared nuclear activities were exposed. To this day, Iran continues to assert that its nuclear programme is designed solely for non-military purposes and that it does not seek nuclear weapons. However, the Iranians refuse to allow increased scrutiny of the nuclear programme and, as a result, Iran is regarded as a serious nuclear proliferation threat by many members of the international community.³

Iranian cooperation with the IAEA is essential to verify Iran’s claims concerning its nuclear programme as the distinctions between civil and military programmes are difficult to detect without access to facilities, personnel and information. Uranium enriched to a low level, for example, can fuel a nuclear power station but, if enriched to a high level, it can serve as the fissile material in a nuclear weapon. The processes and equipment for achieving both levels of enrichment are almost identical.⁴ While

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Iran abides by the terms of its Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA, signed as part of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), this agreement allows the IAEA only limited visibility of the Iranian nuclear programme. Iran’s refusal both to ratify the Additional Protocol that would permit more intrusive inspections, and to agree to measures that would lend additional transparency to its programme, fosters suspicion and prevents the IAEA confirming the absence of undeclared material and activities.⁵

Iran’s unwillingness to cooperate with the IAEA means that the considerable international concern over its nuclear ambitions is based on what is not known, rather than known, of these ambitions. The lack of definitive evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons programme combined with the previous failure of Western intelligence concerning Iraq’s suspected weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programme, has constrained international efforts to deal with Iran more forcefully.⁶ That said, analysts such as Thérèse Delpech of the French Atomic Energy Commission believe Iran’s intentions are clear. Delpech argues that Iran decided to resume its nuclear programme in 1985 during its war with Iraq and then deliberately concealed this programme and the military’s involvement for 20 years until the programme was detected. Delpech points to the alleged existence of documents detailing Iranian nuclear weapons design plans and the conduct of activities relevant to weapons development as further evidence to support her claims.⁷ Iran’s lack of cooperation with the IAEA, including the destruction of evidence and buildings prior to inspection, and the refusal to allow access to nuclear sites, is also cited as evidence that Iran plans to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. Only if Iran conducted a nuclear test similar to those carried out by India and Pakistan in 1998, argues Delpech, could this evidence possibly be more compelling.⁸

Yet while the available evidence might not indisputably indicate that Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons, it is still sufficient to generate international concern. For the US, the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran is particularly worrying.⁹ This scenario could lead to the proliferation of nuclear weapons throughout the Middle East, possibly allowing their acquisition by terrorist organisations. A nuclear-armed Iran would also enjoy a rise in regional influence that would serve to entrench the anti-

⁶ Gawdat Bahgat, ‘Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran’, p. 320.
Western government in Tehran.¹⁰ A nuclear arsenal could embolden Iran and encourage it to act more belligerently in the Middle East—and perhaps even attack Israel.¹¹ In short, ‘[M]ost experts agree that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose real risks to stability and security in the region, if not lead to war between Iran and either its Arab neighbours or Israel.’¹² There is far less agreement on the means to avert such a situation.

The wide range of views on Iran’s nuclear programme makes the task of determining how best to deal with Iran a difficult conundrum for governments and policy advisors. The main options for dealing with Iran include sanctions, containment, dialogue and military action—or combinations of some or all of these measures. However, the required aims of such measures are far from clear. Should Iran be persuaded to abandon its entire nuclear programme or just those activities most likely to have a military dimension, such as uranium enrichment? On the other hand, has Iran now expended too many resources and too much credibility on its nuclear programme to abandon it voluntarily? And if this is the case, is the situation sufficiently serious to justify the potential use of military force by the international community to compel Iran to abandon its nuclear aspirations? These are the issues that form the primary concerns of this paper.

This paper argues that Iran has effectively developed the capability to produce nuclear weapons and, regardless of its current intention to actually do so, should be treated as a nuclear-armed power by the international community. Iran is regarded as a rational state actor in the context of this discussion and, as such, capable of being deterred should it acquire nuclear weapons. Given the cost of measures such as sanctions, containment or military coercion—and their counter-productive effect on regional security—this paper argues that the best approach is to engage Iran diplomatically and economically without the precondition that Iran first cease its enrichment activities. Attempts should be made to build trust by recognising Iran’s position of importance in the region and by reassuring Teheran that its security is not threatened by the US. However, should these measures fail to convince Iran to abide fully by the NPT and Additional Protocol, Iran would not act suicidally by threatening Israel or core US interests. That is, while not the preferred outcome, at the very least a nuclear-armed Iran could be managed.

¹² David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable: Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration, p. 6.
The Status of the Iranian Nuclear Programme

**Nuclear Technology – Some Basics**

A basic understanding of nuclear weapons technology and the uranium enrichment process is necessary to any examination of the evidence for an Iranian nuclear weapons programme. Nuclear weapons and nuclear reactors both generate energy through the fission—or splitting—of the nuclei of uranium or plutonium atoms in a process that releases enormous amounts of energy.\(^\text{13}\) Such weapons employ either the implosion or gun assembly method of initiating fission. The implosion design uses conventional high explosives placed around a fissile core of plutonium or highly enriched uranium (HEU). The explosives are detonated to compress the core to critical mass, the minimum mass that can sustain the nuclear chain reaction that begins when a neutron initiator injects a burst of neutrons into the compressed core. The gun assembly design creates a nuclear chain reaction by using high explosives to force together two masses of HEU in an elongated container. Plutonium is unsuitable for gun assembly weapons as it emits neutrons that can prematurely detonate the weapon, thereby reducing its explosive effect. Building an implosive weapon is a highly complex process, while uranium enrichment presents the only significant challenge to building a simpler gun assembly device.\(^\text{14}\)

As naturally-occurring uranium consists of 99.3 per cent of the isotope uranium-238 (U-238) and only 0.7 per cent of the fissile isotope uranium 235 (U-235), uranium must be enriched to concentrations of 90 per cent or greater of U-235 in order to produce weapons-grade uranium. Low-enriched uranium (LEU) contains between 0.7 and 20 per cent U-235 and, while unsuited to nuclear weapons, is used to fuel nuclear power reactors. Uranium enrichment involves the separation of isotopes and is a technically demanding and expensive process.\(^\text{15}\) While a number of enrichment methods exist, there are only two that are commercially used on a large scale: gaseous diffusion and centrifuge separation.\(^\text{16}\) Both methods use uranium hexafluoride (UF\(_6\)) chemically converted from naturally occurring uranium oxide (U\(_3\)O\(_8\)) as ‘feedstock’ for enrichment and then exploit the difference in mass between UF\(_6\) molecules containing U-235 and those containing U-238 to separate the two isotopes. In the centrifuge method favoured by Iran, UF\(_6\) gas is fed into a cascading series of vacuum tubes each containing a cylinder-shaped rotor that spins rapidly, forcing the heavier U-238 to the

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rotor’s outer edge. The enriched gas is then moved to the next stage of centrifuges while the unenriched gas returns to the previous stage. This process continues until the desired level of enrichment is achieved.\(^\text{17}\)

Given the complexities and expense of uranium enrichment, plutonium-based nuclear weapons are more common. Not only is plutonium cheaper to produce, but the reduced amount of fissile material required for an implosion-type weapon compared to that required for the gun assembly weapon normally associated with HEU, allows plutonium to be used in smaller and lighter warheads. Weapons-grade plutonium 239 is created by bombarding natural uranium with neutrons in a nuclear reactor for a relatively short period—typically several weeks—before it is removed for processing. Reactors are generally purpose-built to produce plutonium efficiently and include those fuelled by natural uranium that use graphite or ‘heavy-water’ (deuterium oxide, or D\(_2\)O) to control (moderate) the nuclear fission process.\(^\text{18}\)

\begin{quote}
**A Brief History of Iran’s Nuclear Programme**

The current crisis over Iran’s nuclear programme can be traced to 2002 when the exile group the National Council of Resistance in Iran revealed that Iran had concealed uranium enriching facilities at Natanz and a heavy water plant at Arak.\(^\text{19}\) Iran’s nuclear capabilities predated this crisis and can be traced as far back as the 1960s. The Iran of Shah Reza Pahlavi—the US’s primary ally in the Middle East—was provided a five-megawatt research reactor by its American ally which became operational in 1967. Iran signed the NPT the following year and ratified the treaty in 1970. Financed by rising oil prices during the 1970s, Iran then engaged a German firm to build two 1,200-megawatt reactors and a French company to build two 900-megawatt reactors. Iran’s first cadre of nuclear scientists was trained at the US Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1975, and Iran constructed an advanced nuclear research centre and developed its uranium mining and ore-processing capabilities around the same time. A US–Iranian nuclear energy cooperation agreement that included the provision of equipment and material from the US was signed only seven months before the 1979 Iranian revolution.\(^\text{20}\)

The Iranian revolution halted the nuclear programme as the first post-revolution government did not believe nuclear energy was necessary and Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, regarded nuclear weapons as ‘un-Islamic’. By this time Iran had

\(^{17}\) *Uranium Enrichment*, World Nuclear Association Information Paper, pp. 5–7.


\(^{19}\) Gawdat Bahgat, ‘Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran’, p. 310.

two incomplete reactors, both at Bushehr, and both subsequently damaged during the Iran–Iraq War that lasted from 1980 to 1988. It was during this war that the Iranian government decided to restart its nuclear programme. However, Iran was highly dependent on foreign technology transfer and the US dissuaded most countries from providing Teheran with the necessary technical assistance and collaboration. Nevertheless, in 1995 after extended negotiations, Russia agreed to assist Iran to complete the Bushehr reactors and to provide technical assistance and training. Russia announced in November 2008 that the Bushehr power plant would become operational in 2009, years later than originally planned. By this time the claims that Iran possessed clandestine nuclear facilities had been verified.

Iran admitted to the existence of previously undeclared nuclear sites at Natanz and Arak following the 2002 release of satellite photographs of the sites. Iran insisted that its nuclear programme was designed for peaceful purposes and that the sites could be inspected by the IAEA. In November 2003, Iran temporarily suspended its uranium enrichment activities in return for promises from the EU3 group (Britain, France and Germany) to provide civilian nuclear technology in return for a long-term suspension of its enrichment programme. Iran also signed an Additional Protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement that allowed short-notice inspections of suspicious sites. However, after two years of negotiation, Iran still had not provided the EU3 with sufficient assurances that its nuclear programme was designed for civilian purposes only and so did not receive the promised civilian technology.

As the stalemate deepened, Iran removed the IAEA seals from its uranium conversion facility at Isfahan in August 2005 and restarted its uranium enrichment activities at Natanz in January 2006. The IAEA Additional Protocol inspections of unofficial nuclear sites were also halted. The IAEA responded by referring Iran to the UNSC in February 2006 over its failure to abide by the NPT safeguards agreement and, in December 2006, the UNSC demanded that Iran cease its enrichment activities, imposing the first of three sets of sanctions. However, Iran pressed ahead with uranium enrichment while continuing to assert that its nuclear programme was designed for civilian purposes only. These assertions persisted despite evidence of a military dimension to Iran’s programme.

25 Iran: Where We Are Today, A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress: First Session, pp. 4–5.
The May 2008 IAEA safeguard report noted that Iran was yet to respond satisfactorily to the evidence produced in a number of alleged studies that indicate Iran had conducted nuclear weaponisation research prior to 2004. The studies reportedly comprise 18 documents and include reference to the development and testing of high-voltage detonator-firing equipment relevant to nuclear weapons as well as indications that Iran tested at least one explosive detonating system used in implosion-type nuclear devices. The studies are also said to include design plans for modifying the Iranian Shahab-3 ballistic missile to accept a nuclear warhead. Iran continues to deny that it has conducted any nuclear weapons-related research, dismisses the studies as ‘forgeries’ and remains unwilling to answer the IAEA’s outstanding questions.

Does Iran Have a Nuclear Weapons Programme?

The most recent IAEA report on Iran’s nuclear programme was released on 19 February 2009 and stated that, as a result of Iran’s lack of cooperation, the agency could not rule out a military dimension to Iran’s nuclear programme. In particular, while no declared nuclear material had been diverted for military purposes, the IAEA could not confirm the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities because Iran refused to abide by the Additional Protocol or allow access to all of the nuclear-related locations specified by the UNSC. On the other hand, the IAEA could report that, contrary to UNSC resolutions, Iran was continuing to enrich uranium and to work on heavy water-related projects, including the construction of a heavy water research reactor. The IAEA report also indicated that, as of 31 January 2009, Iran had produced just over 1,000 kilograms of low-enriched UF₆ since November 2008.

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28 David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable: Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration, p. 9.


Overall, this report did little to change the general conclusions of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran’s nuclear intentions and capabilities.

The 2007 NIE produced by the US National Intelligence Council drew a number of conclusions concerning the Iranian nuclear programme, key among them its ‘high confidence’ assessment that Iran had suspended work on a nuclear weapons programme in 2003, probably in response to international pressure. However, the NIE also reported with ‘moderate to high confidence’ that Iran was keeping open its option of restarting this programme and that the earliest possible date that Iran could theoretically produce a nuclear weapon would be late 2009, although a time-frame of 2010–2015 would be more likely. Iran was also assessed as developing a range of technical capabilities, including its civilian enrichment programme, which could have military application. In short, the NIE assessed that Iran possessed the scientific, technical and industrial capacity to produce nuclear weapons in the near future if it chose to do so. Interestingly, however, the NIE did not mention Iran’s ballistic missile programme.

Iran’s ballistic missile programme, which develops missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, has raised further doubts over the supposedly peaceful purposes of its nuclear programme. Iran has actively sought a ballistic missile capability since being attacked by Iraqi SCUD missiles during the Iran–Iraq War and now possesses at least four different liquid-fuelled missile systems. In addition, Iran appears to be seeking a solid-fuelled, medium-range ballistic missile capability that would offer several advantages over its current liquid-fuelled weapons in terms of shorter launch times, easier handling and storage and potentially smaller missiles. Analysts believe that Iran already possesses the means to develop a ballistic missile capable of delivering a 1,000-kilogram nuclear warhead and with a range of 2,000 kilometres—a range twice that of its current stock of long-range missiles. Iran is estimated to require as little as six to eight years without significant external support to develop a sufficiently small and compact nuclear warhead for a missile, although this would not

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32 The NIE defines ‘high confidence’ as generally indicating that the judgement is based on high-quality information, and/or that the nature of the issue makes it possible to render a solid judgement. A ‘high confidence’ judgement is not a fact or certainty and such judgements still carry a risk of being wrong. ‘Moderate confidence’ is defined as generally meaning that the information is credibly sourced and plausible but not of sufficient quality or corroborated sufficiently to warrant a higher level of confidence. National Intelligence Estimate: Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities, National Intelligence Council, November 2007, available at: <http://www.dni.gov/press_release/2007103_release.pdf> accessed 13 May 2009.


rule out a non-missile delivered weapon in the nearer term.\textsuperscript{37} So what conclusion should be drawn from the plethora of reports, analyses and commentaries on Iran’s suspected nuclear weapons activities?

Despite Iran’s arguments that its nuclear programme is designed for peaceful purposes, much of what is known about the programme suggests that it could have a military dimension; indeed, some aspects of the programme appear difficult to justify on any other grounds. For example, if Iran sought to enrich uranium simply to fuel its Bushehr reactor, it would need to produce 37 tonnes of LEU hexafluoride annually, an amount 60 times greater than its current production capacity. That said, its current enrichment output is sufficient to create one or two nuclear weapons each year.\textsuperscript{38} The production of 37 tonnes of LEU hexafluoride would also require Iran to increase significantly the amount of uranium it mines, although its existing stock of (unenriched) UF\textsubscript{6} would be sufficient for 35 nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{39} However, while Iran’s existing 1,000 kilograms of LEU hexafluoride would theoretically be sufficient for a weapon, the enrichment process would require its prior removal from IAEA supervision, thus immediately signalling Iran’s intent. As Iran’s present enrichment facilities are well known and easily targeted, Iran would have to use secret facilities hidden from the prying eyes of Western intelligence sources.\textsuperscript{40} Despite these obstacles, Iran now appears to possess the capability to produce nuclear weapons irrespective of its professed intention not to do so.\textsuperscript{41}

Regardless of its intent, Iran’s nuclear technology and manufacturing base is close to achieving a breakout capability, the point at which Iran could build a nuclear weapon within around 12 months, and its ballistic missile programme is providing increasingly effective delivery capabilities.\textsuperscript{42} The greatest challenge for any potential Iranian nuclear weapons programme is the production of sufficient amounts of HEU or plutonium as Iran already possesses the knowledge necessary to weaponise fissile material despite the apparent cessation of its weapons development activities in

\textsuperscript{37} Iran’s Nuclear and Missile Potential: A Joint Threat Assessment by US and Russian Technical Experts, pp. 11-12.

\textsuperscript{38} David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable: Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration, p. 7.

\textsuperscript{39} David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable, p. 8.


\textsuperscript{42} Anthony H. Cordesman, ‘Strategic and Warfighting Implications of Nuclear Armed Iran’, p. 2.
2003. Furthermore, as Israel has demonstrated, a nuclear weapons test is not an essential requirement. The mathematics and engineering expertise necessary to develop a nuclear weapon has been available to Iran since 1992, as has Chinese weapon design data, and simulation with non-fissile heavy metals could take the place of a live test. Live testing would become more important in an arms race in which more effective weapons are sought, particularly thermonuclear weapons. In this situation, differentiating between a breakout capability and actual possession of a nuclear weapon could be difficult. Nevertheless, as Iran is expected to achieve breakout capability sometime in 2009, it could produce nuclear weapons within the next few years even if it currently has no plans to do so.

**Iran as a Rational State Actor**

Iran is frequently depicted as an irrational state actor to which the norms of international relations and diplomacy do not apply. Alireza Jafarzadeh, who is credited with bringing Iran’s nuclear programme to world attention in 2002, maintains that the Iranian regime despises the West and is intent on spreading its Islamic revolution throughout the Muslim world. He also regards President Ahmadinejad as an uncompromising religious zealot whose actions and words demonstrate that Iran seeks nuclear weapons with which to force the Middle East to accept extremist Islamic laws and governments. Ahmadinejad’s unorthodox political views and encouragement of confrontation with the West add to his hardline image. His denial of the Holocaust, call for the destruction of Israel and support for Hezbollah, further create the impression that he, and by association Iran, are irrational and incapable of reasoned negotiation.

While President Ahmadinejad is renowned for his uncompromising ideological rhetoric, his power and influence are limited by a political system that is more concerned with Iran’s pragmatic national interests than extremist ideology. Trita Parsi, President of the National Iranian American Council, argues that Iran has not acted suicidally or self-destructively, behaviour that would be associated with an irrational state, despite having had ample opportunity to do so since the 1979

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revolution. He also highlights that Iran’s cleric-dominated regime could not have remained firmly in control of the country in the face of its domestic and international unpopularity and its many internal problems if it were irrational.\(^{50}\) Iran has clearly not made high-risk and dangerous foreign policy decisions of the type that led Saddam Hussein’s Iraq to attack Iran and Kuwait.\(^{51}\) Western intelligence organisations also recognise that Iran is indeed a rational actor regardless of its hostility. As previously noted, the 2007 NIE indicated that Iran probably suspended its nuclear weapons programme in 2003 as a result of international pressure and that this indicated that Iran was in fact more susceptible to diplomacy than previously believed.\(^{52}\) For the Western observer, some understanding of Iran’s political system is necessary to resolve the apparent contradictions between the Iranian President’s inflammatory statements and the actual behaviour of the Iranian state.

**Iran’s Political System**

While President Ahmadinejad is the ‘public face’ of authority, Iran is a theocracy in which power is held by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Hoseini Khamenei, who is effectively the head of state. The Supreme Leader exercises ultimate control over both domestic and international policy decisions, has the right to revoke or change any decisions made by the president, and is elected for a term of eight years by an Assembly of Experts comprising 86 Islamic scholars.\(^{53}\) The Supreme Leader exercises constitutional authority over all of Iran’s major state institutions including the military and security services and is able, through both formal and informal means, to control the executive, legislative and judicial instruments of government and to influence the economic, religious and cultural aspects of daily life.\(^{54}\)

The Supreme Leader exercises his control both directly and indirectly through various councils and the Revolutionary Guards. He is empowered to appoint and dismiss senior government officials, including ministers, and exercises significant control over the Majlis (parliament) by appointing half the members of the Council of Guardians, the organisation that effectively oversees elections and has the power to veto laws passed by the Majlis. The Supreme Leader also appoints the members of the Expediency Council, the organisation responsible for resolving disputes between the


Majlis and the Council of Guardians, and uses this council to pass on his directives to the relevant state bodies for implementation. Ultimately, the Supreme Leader’s authority is based on Article 57 of the Iranian Constitution which places the government under his supervision, and Article 110 that empowers him to formulate all general state policies. This means the Supreme Leader can also exercise control over the president, a fact lamented by the former reformist president, Muhammad Khatami.

That said, there are many who question the Iranian state’s ability to control its volatile president. At least one commentator argues that Ayatollah Khamenei may have difficulty controlling Ahmadinejad because his tenuous religious credentials for the position of Supreme Leader force him to rely on the president’s support in order to retain his position. However, the Supreme Leader’s actions do not support this view. For example, Khamenei empowered the Expediency Council, under the leadership of former President Ali Rafsanjani, to supervise Ahmadinejad’s government following its election in 2005. Similarly, Khamenei established the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations in 2006 in order to counterbalance Iran’s premier foreign policy decision-making agency, the Supreme National Security Council, after its chairman—Ahmadinejad—alarmed both moderate reformers and conservative pragmatists by making particularly provocative comments regarding Israel.

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has demonstrated rationality and pragmatism in pursuing its national interests despite the often inflammatory rhetoric of its religious and secular leaders. President Ahmadinejad, for example, is highly critical of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. His remarks attract broad support among Muslims and are unlikely to make a significant difference to Iran’s already poor relationship with the US and Israel. Conversely, he is silent on Russia’s treatment of Muslims in Chechnya and China’s treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang province. Ideological interests only take precedence over strategic interests when the two happen to be complementary or the latter are relatively unimportant.

57 Ray Takeyh, ‘Time for Détente with Iran’, p. 27.
61 Katrine Barnekow Rasmussen, The Foreign Policy of Iran: Ideology and Pragmatism in the Islamic Republic, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, March 2009, available at:
contradiction between the rhetoric of the Iranian leadership and the actions of the state often constitute a deliberate attempt to conceal Iran’s intent and make it appear irrational and unpredictable. This approach is the result of Iran’s belief that its previous openness was exploited by foreigners in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so as to manipulate and control Iran and its resources. Iran is a rational state actor controlled by a pragmatic regime, and its motivations for pursuing nuclear weapons appear to constitute a determined ‘quest for security and respect’.

**Iran’s Security Interests**

The prime driver behind Iran’s apparent desire to acquire a nuclear weapons capability is national security. Iran has endured foreign intervention in its domestic affairs since the ‘Great Game’ between Britain and Russia at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the Cold War, it was the turn of the US to intervene in Iran’s domestic situation. However, the Iran–Iraq War proved the watershed event in Iran’s strategic thinking when, despite its appeals to the international community for assistance against Iraqi aggression, the world’s response was muted. Saddam Hussein had clearly contravened international law by employing ballistic missiles against Iran’s cities and chemical weapons against its soldiers, yet the international community chose not to act. Consequently, Iran’s leaders concluded that international rules and regulations were ineffectual and that Iran had to ensure its own security. An independent nuclear deterrent presented the best option for achieving this. More recently, the US encirclement of Iran through its occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and the Bush administration’s inclusion of Iran in its ‘axis of evil’ and expressed desire for regime change in Tehran provided an impetus for Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear capability in order to deter US aggression. Public statements by Iranian officials that they no longer fear a US attack are exaggerated as many of these same individuals still express concern in private. But, ironically for Iran, any attempt to ensure its security by acquiring nuclear weapons may well have the opposite effect.

An Iranian nuclear weapons capability could increase the likelihood of a pre-emptive attack on Iran by the US—the very act that Iran seeks to deter. Such an attack would threaten both the Iranian regime and Middle Eastern stability in general. Furthermore, Iranian nuclear weapons are likely to invite a response from other countries, most notably Israel which would face a potential existential threat. The prospect of attack would probably ensure that Israel develops a credible second strike

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65 Gawdat Bahgat, *Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran*, p. 320.
capability to likewise threaten Iran. Iran’s vulnerability to nuclear attack should not be underestimated given its high degree of centralisation based on Tehran and the fact that its society would be unlikely to recover from nuclear attacks against its major cities.66 For Iran, the reality is that ‘the more forces it deploys, the more it will be targeted in return.’67

The Importance of Prestige

Opinion polls suggest that the majority of Iranians support a nuclear energy programme for reasons of prestige, and are not in favour of nuclear weapons per se.68 National prestige provides a common cause for uniting Iranians at all levels of society and on all sides of politics in support of Iran’s (peaceful) nuclear programme. Conservatives such as Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad and reformists such as former President Khatami all believe that nuclear technology is Iran’s natural right and a symbol of greatness.69 Most Iranians are genuinely proud of their nation’s history as a great civilisation and believe that Iran has been deprived of its natural leadership role in the region by unscrupulous foreign intervention. Their sense of victimisation is further deepened by the fact that Iran is predominately a Shi’ite country and Shi’ites have traditionally been persecuted by the more numerous Sunnis. Most Iranians support Iran’s nuclear programme because they regard it as an important means of re-establishing their nation’s rightful position in the world. Furthermore, Western efforts to prevent Iran from developing what it claims is a peaceful nuclear capability are viewed as hypocritical given that the West has acquiesced to India, Israel and Pakistan developing nuclear weapons capabilities—all the more galling given that Iran has signed the NPT and these other countries have not.70 Iran’s intention to pursue its nuclear programme has now been linked to its demand to be treated with respect.71

Domestic Politics

Although Iran’s nuclear aspirations were predominantly motivated by pragmatic reasons of security and prestige, the programme has also come to be closely associated with domestic politics. There is little doubt that Iran is an autocratic state, although its press, parliament and elections have been permitted more freedom since 1979 than those of many of its Arab neighbours. Furthermore, a large proportion of Iran’s population is young and politically conscious and has agitated for political

liberalisation and economic opportunity.\textsuperscript{72} Given that President Ahmadinejad was originally elected on a largely populist platform that included the promise of economic reform, he now faces difficulty in reconciling Iranians to the increasingly poor performance of the economy. Accordingly, Ahmadinejad has exploited international criticism of Iran’s nuclear programme to divert domestic attention from the economy and to unite the population and generate support for his opposition to what is portrayed as foreign meddling. Ahmadinejad’s defiant stance on the nuclear issue has received widespread support from Iranians and become a source of great national pride. In fact, uranium enrichment has now become so closely associated with Iran’s national identity that the regime would face difficulty in agreeing to its permanent suspension because it would undermine its domestic support base.\textsuperscript{73} Even in Iran the maxim that ‘all politics is local’ remains relevant.\textsuperscript{74}

**Economic Reasons**

Economic reasons are sometimes also cited as a motivating factor for Iran’s nuclear programme. Yet Iran’s claim that this programme is intended for the peaceful purpose of generating energy is often dismissed on the grounds that such a plan is not economically justifiable.\textsuperscript{75} Even so, there is some logic in Iran’s seeking to diversify its energy sources through nuclear power even though it is a major oil and gas-producing country. Iran has a growing population and already imports more than 40 per cent of its refined petroleum.\textsuperscript{76} Furthermore, the availability of nuclear energy could allow the country to export more of its crude oil for export income. Conversely, it could be argued that the cost of enriching uranium for Iran’s single Russian nuclear reactor is far higher than that of simply purchasing LEU in the same way as countries such as South Korea and Sweden. In addition, the laser enrichment programme currently under development at Lashkar Abad would reportedly use more electricity than it would generate.\textsuperscript{77} However, all these cost-effectiveness arguments rest on the assumption that Iran would feel confident that its supply would not be interrupted if it were to source its fuel externally. Given that some areas of the Iranian economy have already been crippled by sanctions, an Iranian decision to pay the higher cost of

\textsuperscript{72} Gawdat Bahgat, ‘Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran’, pp. 321–322.

\textsuperscript{73} Bradley L. Bowman, ‘The “Demand Side”: Avoiding a Nuclear-Armed Iran’, pp. 635–636.


\textsuperscript{77} Thérèse Delpech, Iran and the Bomb: The Abdication of International Responsibility, pp. 9–10.
developing a domestic supply of nuclear fuel would appear justifiable. Nonetheless, any economic motivation for Iran’s nuclear programme appears secondary to the reasons of security and prestige.

The Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran

This paper has argued that Iran is a rational state actor that effectively possesses the capability to produce nuclear weapons, even if it does not currently intend to do so. This assessment provides a context in which the implications of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability can be evaluated. The more commonly held worst-case scenarios of a nuclear-armed Iran are essentially fourfold: First, a nuclear arsenal could embolden Iran to act more aggressively in the region, particularly towards Israel. Second, a nuclear-armed Iran would encourage nuclear proliferation among its neighbours. Third the risk of leaking nuclear weapons technology to non-state actors is increased. Fourth is the concern that a nuclear-armed Iran would undermine broader Middle Eastern security and stability could be undermined. These concerns are not necessarily foregone conclusions; however, given their disastrous potential, they certainly deserve greater scrutiny.

Iranian Aggression

One key concern is that a nuclear-armed Iran might feel emboldened to act aggressively in pursuing its national interests. At the lower end of the scale, this could involve Iran using its nuclear capability to intimidate its non-nuclear armed neighbours to increase oil prices, for example, or reduce oil production or even to dissuade regional governments from cooperating with the US. At the higher end, Iran might consider that the deterrent effect of its nuclear weapons would allow it to employ conventional force offensively in its region without the fear of a military response. However, should Iran use, or even threaten to use, nuclear weapons, this would involve a significant degree of risk—something that a rational state is unlikely to accept. The pragmatic Iranian leadership is well aware that the US would probably support its Middle Eastern allies if they were threatened because US strategic interests require these countries to retain their autonomy. In other words, the US could deter

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Iran from excessively aggressive behaviour in the same manner that it deterred Soviet hostility during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{80}

While a US nuclear response to any Iranian aggression might not be guaranteed, ‘the consequences of losing a gamble against a vastly superior nuclear power like the United States are grave.’\textsuperscript{81} This risk would be clearly recognised by the Iranian leadership and, in any event, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are more likely to rely on US protection than acquiesce to Iranian demands that would encourage ongoing blackmail.\textsuperscript{82} Israel, however, is the country widely regarded as most at risk from Iranian nuclear weapons.

The public statements of President Ahmadinejad that Israel should be ‘wiped off the map’ are often used to portray Iran’s nuclear programme as an existential threat to Israel. Certainly there is little doubt that a nuclear strike on Israel would have catastrophic consequences given its small geographic size and concentrated population.\textsuperscript{83} Nevertheless, while this position is the one most commonly cited in public by Israeli officials, it does not reflect the view generally held in Israel. For the reasons discussed earlier, many Israeli strategic commentators regard Iran’s leadership as rational and do not believe Iran would employ nuclear weapons against Israel. Their belief rests on the understanding that Iran would probably be destroyed by Israel’s arsenal of an estimated 200 nuclear weapons and its reputed submarine-based, second strike capability.\textsuperscript{84} Gawdat Bahgat also points out that the Iranian rhetoric directed against Israel is designed primarily to emphasise the government’s revolutionary credentials as Iran has, so far, avoided direct conflict with Israel and relied instead on a proxy war strategy. Iran’s longstanding support for Hezbollah—particularly during its 2006 war with Israel—is one recent example.\textsuperscript{85} In short, if Iran has been unwilling to risk a conventional war with Israel, it is even less likely to risk a nuclear war.

\textsuperscript{80} The contribution of nuclear deterrence to avoiding conventional and unconventional conflict between the Soviet Union and United States is a sometimes contentious issue. However, Jeffrey Record argues that it is implausible to suggest that the threat of state extinction did not factor in the Soviet leadership’s decision-making process. See Jeffrey Record, ‘Nuclear Deterrence, Preventive War, and Counterproliferation’, Cato Institute Policy Analysis, No. 519, 8 July 2004, available at: \url{<http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa519.pdf>} accessed 10 July 2009, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{81} Barry R. Posen, ‘We Can Live With A Nuclear Iran’, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{82} Barry R. Posen, ‘We Can Live With A Nuclear Iran’, p. 3.


\textsuperscript{84} Trita Parsi, \textit{Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.}, pp. 270–271.

Regardless of the lack of consensus in Israel on the nature of the threat posed by Iran’s nuclear programme, there is agreement that the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran is dangerous and should be averted.\textsuperscript{86} Even if Iran did not attack Israel, a nuclear-armed Iran would undermine Israel’s military pre-eminence in the region, jeopardising Israel’s ability to deter militant Palestinian and Lebanese-based organisations, and would compel the US to recognise Iran’s regional influence at the expense of Israel.\textsuperscript{87} Israel has previously enforced its monopoly on nuclear weapons in the region by making pre-emptive strikes on suspected nuclear facilities in both Iraq and Syria, and might attempt to take the same action again. However, an Israeli attack could prompt Iran to retaliate in at least three ways: by inciting war in Lebanon; closing the Straits of Hormuz; and encouraging attacks against Western forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Conversely, if Israel does not attack, both states would probably still assume a heightened state of alert, thereby significantly increasing the potential for miscalculation leading to war.\textsuperscript{88} The consequences of such miscalculation would undoubtedly escalate should Iran’s nuclear ambitions prompt a nuclear arms race in the region.

**Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East**

According to analysts such as Joseph Cirincione, the most likely threat posed by Iran’s nuclear programme is not that Iran might produce and use nuclear weapons, but that its programme alone is likely to encourage nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{89} Given the region’s existing territorial, political and religious disputes, this would certainly increase the potential for nuclear conflict. Since 2006 more than a dozen Middle Eastern countries including Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain and Kuwait have expressed interest in nuclear programmes for ostensibly peaceful purposes. However, the timing of these expressions is telling: they occurred during the period in mid-2006 when nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran appeared to reach an impasse, the US was stalemated in Iraq and Afghanistan, thereby constraining its ability to confront Iran militarily, and Iran had demonstrated its strategic influence by supporting Hezbollah’s arguably successful conflict against Israel. Therefore, as even a genuinely peaceful nuclear programme also provides the expertise and knowledge applicable to a weapons programme, Cirincione concludes that the region’s increased interest in nuclear technology is motivated by a desire to counter Iran’s potential nuclear weapons capability.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{86}Gawdat Bahgat, ‘Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran’, p. 316.

\textsuperscript{87}Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, p. 272.


Yet, while the view that Iran’s nuclear capability is likely to initiate a Middle Eastern nuclear arms race is widely held, a counter view holds that the risk of such an arms race has been exaggerated. Commentators such as Barry Posen argue that, even if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, only Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are realistically capable of developing their own corresponding capabilities and each of these countries could be dissuaded from doing so. Egypt may feel politically obliged to acquire nuclear weapons should Iranian nuclear developments prompt Israel to confirm its currently undeclared nuclear weapons capability. However, as Egypt is heavily reliant on foreign aid, it could be subjected to intense international pressure not to do so. Conversely, while Saudi Arabia could fund a nuclear weapons programme and acquire the necessary technology on the black market, the few potential suppliers could be readily monitored and interdicted. Saudi Arabia would also take years to build the scientific, engineering and industrial base to develop a nuclear capability. During this time it would be forced to rely on the US or Europe for security guarantees that would make it more susceptible to diplomatic pressure to abandon its nuclear weapons aspirations. Turkey could be safely reassured by the fact that US guarantees were sufficient to counter the potential threat of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, so similar guarantees should prove sufficient against Iran. Although Syria is believed to harbour nuclear ambitions, any Syrian nuclear programme would be extremely vulnerable to disruption during the extended period it would take to develop a nuclear weapons capability. In fact, this scenario may have already occurred in 2007 when Israeli aircraft attacked suspected nuclear facilities in Syria.

However, the view that a Middle Eastern nuclear arms race could be prevented should Iran develop a nuclear weapons capability is difficult to sustain. First, any attempt to dissuade Middle Eastern countries from acquiring their own nuclear deterrent against Iran would usually require credible security guarantees from the US. The US public is unlikely to be willing to tie its own security to that of the volatile Middle East by placing the region under the US nuclear umbrella, especially when many of the countries involved are not formal allies. Second, the reality is that civilian nuclear programmes can be pursued by any state both legally and for plausible reasons, allowing them also to develop much of the expertise and technical

91 See, for example, Anthony H. Cordesman, ‘Strategic and Warfighting Implications of Nuclear Armed Iran’, p. 8.
capability necessary to develop nuclear weapons if desired. In short, the Iranian nuclear programme does raise a significant risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and begs the further question of whether or not such proliferation would extend to non-state actors.

**Leaking of Nuclear Weapons Technology to Terrorist Organisations**

Most experts agree that countries with limited nuclear assets are unlikely to transfer a nuclear weapon to another state or non-state actor such as a terrorist organisation. This is not only because of a scarcity of weapons, but also because the external actors are unlikely to be trusted to always demonstrate loyalty and restraint towards the donor, especially in a crisis. That said, the possibility cannot be ruled out. For instance, non-state actors might be used as proxies for attacks on a third state—thus avoiding attribution for the action to their patron—or for hiding weapons to prevent their discovery or destruction. But while Iran has provided terrorist groups such as Hezbollah with conventional weapons, providing non-state actors with nuclear weapons is a much higher risk strategy. Should Iran provide nuclear weapons to an organisation that then uses them, or threatens their use, and Iran is identified as the origin of the weapons, Iran itself would be at risk of a retaliatory nuclear attack. Moreover, Iran has not provided chemical or biological weapons to any of its Arab proxies such as Hezbollah and so would be similarly unlikely to provide them with nuclear weapons. Iran’s leadership is rational and would neither wish to invite retaliation with WMD should one of its proxies employ such a weapon itself, nor undermine its goal of regional dominance by sharing sensitive technology with potential competitors. Of course, this does not rule out an individual or group of individuals attempting to provide nuclear weapons technology to non-state actors for their own purposes. If successful, such activity would seriously undermine Iranian foreign and strategic policy and so Iran could be expected to place significant safeguards on any nuclear capability it might acquire.

**Regional Stability**

Regardless of the likelihood of Iran leaking nuclear weapons to terrorist organisations or using them to underwrite aggressive behaviour, its simple possession of such weapons would encourage nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and undermine regional stability by increasing tensions between countries. Therefore, while Iran’s

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apparent plans to acquire an actual or threshold nuclear weapons capability might be
genuinely based on reasons such as prestige and rights, they would inevitably impact
on the security of the Middle East. Nuclear weapons might provide Iran with a
significant strategic tool that could increase its influence in the region and change the
balance of power in its favour. Yet they would do so at significant cost because the
risk of miscalculation and error between nuclear-armed adversaries in an already
volatile region is grave and cannot be dismissed. The irony remains that ‘regardless
of Iran’s ultimate decision to cross the nuclear threshold, the current Iranian approach
is having the net effect of reducing Tehran’s security.’

Dealing with Iran

Given the potential for Iran’s nuclear programme to destabilise the Middle East to the
point that nuclear war is conceivable, determining how to deal with Iran has assumed
critical importance now that Iran is on the cusp of developing a nuclear breakout
capability, if indeed it has not already done so. Furthermore, the US must assume
prime responsibility for solving this problem because only the US has the necessary
economic and political capital to do so. This is not to say that the US can act
unilaterally, as significant international consensus will be required to ensure the
success of whichever approach is taken.

Containment

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the US has attempted unsuccessfully to isolate
and contain Iran. Iran has remained defiant and has undermined the US’s Middle
Eastern security goals to achieve energy security, prevent terrorism, stop the spread of
WMD and underwrite Israel’s security. Furthermore, this failure has occurred
despite the containment policy having attracted broad bipartisan support in
Washington. The policy’s lack of success reflects the difficulty of attempting to
contain a state that exerts its influence indirectly through aiding terrorists, funding
proxies and supporting foreign Shi’ite organisations. Its failure is also indicative of
the difficulty of gaining the necessary level of regional support to make the policy
work effectively. Arguably, no US government worked harder to contain Iran than

Diplomacy Fails’, p. 4.
102 Nihat Ali Ozcan and Ozgür Ozdamar, ‘Iran’s Nuclear Program and the Future of U.S.-Iranian
Relations’, p. 125.
Diplomacy Fails’, p. 4.
Relations’, p. 131.
the George W Bush administration. This government increased the US military presence in the Gulf, threatened Iran with regime change, funded a US$75 million democracy programme to encourage regime change in Tehran, successfully sponsored the imposition of tough economic sanctions against Iran and worked with moderate Middle Eastern governments to build support for containing Iran. However, such containment proved ineffective and is even less likely to be effective in the future.

Notwithstanding that containment has so far failed to change Iran’s political course, international consensus, particularly support from Russia and China, would be essential prerequisites for this policy to have any chance of success in the future. This could prove difficult as these countries may see their own national interests, such as countering US influence or maintaining economic opportunities, as ill-served by isolating Iran. The successful containment of Iran would also rely on the cooperation of neighbouring countries, and regional Arab governments, in particular, would have difficulty sustaining this policy in the face of significant domestic opposition. The US remains deeply unpopular in the Arab world given its policies and actions such as the intervention in Iraq and its support for Israel. In contrast, Iran’s status has increased through its opposition to the US and its support for Hezbollah against Israel.

Any attempt to build a successful containment strategy against Iran would require a significant degree of cooperation among the regional Arab states to ensure that Iran remained isolated. This would, in fact, require a greater level of Arab solidarity than actually exists. For example, while Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain are fearful of Iran’s increasing influence, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are more sanguine given that they do not have a Shi’ite minority problem and have benefitted from strong economic relations with Iran since the mid-1990s. In any case, securing regional assistance to contain Iran would risk promoting Sunni extremism as a counter to Shi’ite Iran. After all, the outcome of US efforts in the 1980s to gain the support of Arab states against Iran was a radical Sunni political culture that helped spawn Al Qaeda.

111 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S., pp. 277–278.
Highlighting the difficulty of containing Iran does not mean that Iran is not susceptible to international pressure or isolation. As previously argued, Iran seeks international recognition and respect, and the 2007 NIE concluded that Iran was more susceptible to diplomatic pressure than previously believed. However, Iran does not appear to seek a position of influence and leadership at the expense of its security or prestige, the latter two of which have come to be associated with its nuclear programme. In other words, Iranians are likely to choose uranium enrichment over readmission to the international community.\(^{114}\) In the words of Bradley Bowman, ‘[I]f Iran’s core motivations remain unaddressed, no amount of international pressure and economic sanction will preclude this nation from obtaining nuclear weapons.’\(^{115}\)

**Sanctions**

While there is reasonable consensus that containment policies aimed at isolating Iran have been unsuccessful in convincing Teheran to abandon its uranium enrichment plans, and are likely to remain so, the use of sanctions could prove a more effective option. Sanctions have already contributed to Iran’s decision in 2003 to halt, albeit temporarily, some of its nuclear activities. The impression that sanctions were exerting significant pressure on Iran was reinforced by its subsequent negotiation proposal that listed the cessation of sanctions as one of its two highest priority aims.\(^{116}\) Sanctions are believed to have contributed to Iran’s high unemployment and inflation rates and to have prevented much-needed maintenance and upgrading of its oil and gas industry infrastructure.\(^{117}\) While the effects of the sanctions were somewhat mitigated by high oil prices, the current global economic downturn has reduced oil prices and limited the Iranian economy’s capacity to cope. Consequently, sanctions can be seen as a relatively low-cost way of sustaining pressure on the Iranian economy. In addition, the imposition of sanctions makes a clear statement that an Iranian nuclear weapons capability is unacceptable. However, commentators do not usually advocate the use of sanctions alone and recommend that a genuine dialogue between the US and Iran be commenced in parallel with the imposition of sanctions.\(^{118}\)

The petroleum sector is the key area in which sanctions are most likely to exert pressure on the Iranian government. While Iran has demonstrated an ability to secure significant external aid despite economic sanctions, petroleum-related export and import sanctions appear to be more difficult for it to circumvent.\(^{119}\) Although Iran is a

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major oil exporter, the country is heavily dependent on international investment and technology to modernise and expand its oil and gas production. Similarly, Iran’s limited oil refining capacity and the nature of its oil reserves mean that it is unable to meet its domestic requirements without importing refined petroleum products. Sanctions aimed at Iran’s oil and gas industry are therefore likely to seriously constrain the Iranian economy and weaken domestic support for the regime. On the other hand, such sanctions are also likely to undermine the global economy. Despite the current weakening of demand due to the economic crisis, oil prices will rise when the global economy recovers and demand increases, a problem that will be exacerbated if access to Iran’s oil is denied. This will make achieving the international consensus necessary for successful sanctions highly problematic. The European Union, a key partner in any future sanctions, continues to invest in a multi-billion gas pipeline partly fed by Iranian gas.120

Sanctions are also problematic because they could work to effectively harm the Iranian population and global economy rather than to convince the Iranian leadership to alter its behaviour.121 Given its commitment to acquiring a nuclear capability, the Iranian regime is highly unlikely to succumb to sanctions and abandon its nuclear programme. Indeed, externally enforced hardship might actually increase domestic support for the regime, particularly as the nuclear programme enjoys broad public support in Iran.122 Sanctions will be limited in their effectiveness unless they are supported consistently across the international community. This requirement will be particularly problematic in the case of China, the former Soviet republics and regional nations which would stand to gain by replacing their Western economic engagement with that of Iran. The effectiveness of sanctions will also be diminished by the fact that Iran is already capable of supporting a nuclear weapons programme with its own resources and some additional capabilities that it could easily smuggle into the country. Overall, while sanctions might be of some value if targeted at vulnerable areas of the Iranian economy, in isolation they are unlikely to force the Iranian regime to change its nuclear aspirations significantly.123

The Military Option

The use of military force to halt Iran’s nuclear programme is not an attractive option, not least because there is insufficient targeting information. The last two Iraq wars demonstrated the enormous difficulties that confronted intelligence agencies attempting to correctly identify and target clandestine weapons-related sites, particularly gas centrifuge facilities. Almost all of Iraq’s centrifuge enrichment

120 Anthony H. Cordesman, ‘Strategic and Warfighting Implications of Nuclear Armed Iran’, pp. 16–18.
facilities escaped attack during the 1990–1991 Gulf War because they were only correctly identified later through intrusive inspections. In Iran’s case there is no definitive, unclassified list of Iran’s nuclear sites and estimates of the number of facilities that actually exist vary from 18 to over 70.

Furthermore, Iran appears to have learnt from Israel’s successful strike against the Iraqi Osarik reactor in 1981, and placed some of its key sites underground or widely dispersed them in order to make them more difficult to attack. Some of the sites are also co-located with facilities that have peaceful or non-nuclear functions and many of Iran’s nuclear research, development and production capabilities appear to be modularised for ease of relocation. Western intelligence agencies are unsure of the actual existence of Iran’s rumoured weapons-related facilities, let alone their precise location. Similarly, while Iran is known to have centrifuge production facilities, their location is also unknown, as is the destination of the centrifuges once they are completed. Moreover, even in the doubtful case that classified intelligence was sufficient to allow the targeting of Iran’s nuclear sites, an attack would have serious adverse consequences.

A military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities thus offers false hope of a solution. Furthermore, despite any damage that might be inflicted, an attack would be very likely to result in a regional war and even prompt Iran to accelerate its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. In any case, Israel lacks the military capability to damage critically or destroy Iran’s programme by itself and even the US might face difficulty in destroying all of Iran’s hardened, underground facilities. Any attack would, however, lead Iran to pursue its nuclear programme even more covertly, rally Iranians to their government and prompt Iran to retaliate, probably through proxies, against US interests in Afghanistan, Iraq and possibly the US homeland itself. The Islamic world would be further radicalised, resulting in increased levels of terrorism and other anti-Western activities, and oil prices would be forced higher with serious consequences for the global economy. In addition, an attack would almost certainly resolve any residual internal debate on Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. The

124 David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable: Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration, p. 23.
130 David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable: Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration, p. 24.
legitimacy of such an attack could also be questioned given that, while the IAEA can still monitor Iran’s declared LEU, it has been unable to prove that Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{131}

**Unconditional Engagement**

During the northern spring of 2009, the Obama administration signalled its intention to engage Iran in genuine dialogue in order to solve the Iranian nuclear problem.\textsuperscript{132} After all, containment and sanctions have clearly failed to convince Iran to comply with IAEA demands to cease uranium enrichment and to provide more transparency of its nuclear programme. The military option also appears to have limited chance of success and may be prohibitively expensive. While engaging Iran might ultimately prove unsuccessful, at least a genuine attempt that fails would add greater legitimacy to any more drastic option that might have to be taken.\textsuperscript{133} In any case, diplomacy and dialogue would be necessary to limit the chances of miscalculation and conflict with Iran if it does develop a nuclear weapons capability.\textsuperscript{134} Certainly, Iran has proven itself willing to negotiate previously although, admittedly, it did perceive itself to be in a position of weakness at the time (2003), and the US dismissed the approach.\textsuperscript{135} Yet, since 1972, the US has signed a number of nuclear arms agreements with the Soviet Union and later Russia, which demonstrates that the US can negotiate successfully on nuclear issues with governments that hold fundamentally different political views.\textsuperscript{136}

Successful engagement with Iran will require the US in particular to accept Iran as a regional power and to disavow enforced regime change there. Iran is an opportunistic power attempting to assume a position of predominance in its immediate region but, despite its belligerent rhetoric, Iran is not a genocidal, expansionist state. Accordingly, any policy towards Iran should acknowledge that country as a rising power and establish a framework for limiting Iran’s extremist behaviour.\textsuperscript{137} This approach is supported by no less a figure than the former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, who advocated a policy of détente as the solution

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\item[134] Anthony H. Cordesman, ‘Strategic and Warfighting Implications of Nuclear Armed Iran’, p. 11.
\item[137] Ray Takeyh, ‘Time for Détente with Iran’, p. 21.
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to the Iranian threat as a means to alter the Iranian regime’s pattern of conduct. He argues that Iran will inevitably become a nuclear power and, before this occurs, Iran should be convinced to become a responsible regional state actor. While the Iranian regime may face difficulty in abandoning uranium enrichment given that its credibility is now associated with the capability, the regime would receive significant domestic political credit should Iran re-enter the international community and have its right to a peaceful nuclear programme acknowledged.

Initially, negotiations should be commenced without the requirement that Iran first halt its uranium enrichment fuel reprocessing activities as this precondition has proved a barrier to negotiations in the past. However, the ultimate goal of negotiations should be to persuade Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment and fuel reprocessing activities and any further work on the Arak heavy water reactor. In return, the members of the international community should commit to helping Iran build modern light-water reactors, sign legally-binding contracts to supply nuclear fuel and commit to providing Iran with economic, political, energy, agricultural, environmental and security assistance. These commitments should be made public so as to allow the Iranian population to place pressure on its government to foreshare nuclear weapons. However, Iran should be provided limited time in which to respond so as to prevent negotiations dragging out while Iran continues to develop its enrichment capabilities. This will require a military strike option to remain available and obvious in order to exert pressure on Iran to negotiate in a timely manner. The Iranians must remain convinced that the military option would not be used if they abandon any nuclear weapon aspirations and that this option is aimed only at halting a weapons programme, not forcing regime change. Convincing Iran to accept overtures of engagement will not, however, be the only challenge in this approach.

Convincing Iran’s neighbours that a policy of engagement is the preferred method of dealing with Iran will be difficult. While Israel is aware of the risks involved in attempting to strike Iran militarily, Israel has less tolerance for negotiation because it

140 David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable: Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration, pp. 18–19.
has more to fear from Iran and has less of a deterrent capability than the US. However, this reluctance could be mitigated by the US extending its nuclear deterrence capability to include the defence of Israel and providing it with additional missile defence and early warning systems. A similar approach has been suggested for convincing Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council states that their interests will not be surrendered in any US-Iranian détente. While providing both Arab and Israeli allies with nuclear guarantees against Iran would be problematic, such assurances are often seen as the only means of preventing a regional arms race.144 As mentioned earlier, however, some commentators cannot envisage the US public allowing the provision of nuclear guarantees to these countries. Instead, these countries may have to rely on the reaffirmation of conventional security commitments, the deployment of missile defence systems and other defensive measures such as the provision of military training.145 Ultimately, however, the international community may have to deal with the reality of a nuclear-armed Iran as no approach can be guaranteed to alter Iran’s intentions.

**Deterrence**

Deterrence therefore provides the best option for dealing with Iran in the likely event it cannot be prevented from developing a nuclear weapons capability.146 However, given that military action would be extremely costly, even if it should achieve its aims, the threat of military force might not be taken seriously enough by Iran to deter it from acquiring nuclear weapons in the first instance.147 Nonetheless, the willingness of the international community to bear the cost of military action might change significantly should Iran’s acquisition of such weapons appear imminent, thereby presenting a markedly greater threat to international security.

Should Iran actually acquire nuclear weapons and act provocatively, it would face the threat of a pre-emptive nuclear strike from more powerful nuclear-armed states, most likely the US and/or Israel. Iran would be subject to intense scrutiny and any perceived deployment of its nuclear capabilities would risk inviting a pre-emptive attack from them.148 Consequently, as a rational state actor, Iran would recognise this risk and refrain from excessively adventurous behaviour that could endanger its very existence. That said, the preferred option remains preventing Iran from acquiring

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nuclear weapons through an international policy of engagement and sustained pressure expressed mainly through economic sanctions. After all, given the destructiveness of nuclear weapons and the fallibility of individuals, organisations and technology, the world grows more dangerous with every additional nuclear-armed state. Even so, ‘there is a crucial difference between hostility and irrationality, and a hostile Iran should be a far more attractive proposition to the United States than an irrational one’.\footnote{Joseph Cirincione, ‘A Mideast Nuclear Chain Reaction?’ p. 439.}

**Conclusion**

This paper’s analysis of Iranian nuclear ambitions draws a number of conclusions—foremost among these is that it is prudent to assume Iran has effectively reached a nuclear breakout capability. Iran could produce a nuclear weapon in the next few years should it decide to do so, noting that the production of sufficient amounts of HEU or plutonium presents the most significant remaining obstacle. Given this assumption, Iran’s intentions concerning the development of nuclear weapons are less worthy of debate because, regardless of what those intentions are now, once Iran has an operational nuclear capability ‘the nation will be just a political decision away from a nuclear weapon’.\footnote{Barry R. Posen, ‘We Can Live With A Nuclear Iran’, p. 3.} This also means that the international community, particularly the US, would be better employed determining how to prevent Iran from graduating its nuclear programme from civilian to military purposes rather than attempting to force it to abandon its nuclear aspirations altogether. This goal may have some chance of success given that Iran is a rational state motivated by rational aims.

Despite the often provocative rhetoric and sometimes bewildering behaviour of its leadership, Iran is a rational state actor. A close examination of its actions reveals that Iran is a highly pragmatic state that has repeatedly placed its national interests ahead of its ideological preferences. The apparent contradictions between Iranian words and actions appear to be deliberate attempts to deceive and confuse potential enemies. This is not to say that every contradiction is a premeditated ploy because Iran, like any country, will make foreign policy misjudgements. However, while the current Iranian president may be something of a maverick hardliner, his authority is regulated by the Iranian theocracy that wields the real power in Iran under the leadership of the Supreme Leader. Iran is not attempting to export its religious or revolutionary ideology but rather to resume its historical position of regional pre-eminence. In this context, Iran is seeking to develop a nuclear capability in order to gain both security and prestige.

\footnote{David Albright and Jacqueline Shire, *Nuclear Iran: Not Inevitable: Essential Background and Recommendations for the Obama Administration*, p. 22.}

\footnote{Jon B. Alterman, *Middle East Notes and Comment: Another Way with Iran*, p. 2.}

\footnote{Another Way with Iran (2005), p. 2.}
Ironically, Iran’s nuclear programme may ultimately undermine the country’s security—precisely the opposite effect to that intended. Despite the fact that Iran is unlikely to engage in deliberately high risk, provocative behaviour such as attacking Israel, threatening neighbours or leaking nuclear technology to terrorist organisations, Iran’s nuclear capabilities and apparently hostile attitude will concern many of its neighbours. This concern will almost inevitably lead them to consider developing their own nuclear capabilities thereby increasing the prospect of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Given the region’s existing conflicts and tensions, the existence of nuclear-armed states would further destabilise the Middle East and raise the spectre of regional nuclear war. Although the West, and the US in particular, has some ‘levers’ available to dissuade states from this course of action, their success cannot be guaranteed. The importance of dealing effectively with Iran’s nuclear ambitions thus cannot be understated.

So far, policies of containment, sanctions and military threats have failed to convince Iran to abandon its nuclear programme and, in some cases, perceived external pressure has only hardened Iranian resolve. Increasingly severe sanctions may be useful to ameliorate Iran’s behaviour, although they are unlikely to be successful in isolation. On the other hand, the use of military force could further destabilise the Middle East and undermine Western interests in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama administration’s new approach of seeking to engage Iran in order to resolve the nuclear impasse offers more hope for a solution, particularly when supported by the threat of increased sanctions and possible military action. While there is no certainty of success, this new approach will at least provide a legal and moral basis for any more forceful action that might need to be taken. In any case, should Iran achieve nuclear weapon status, avenues for diplomacy and dialogue will be necessary to reduce the possibility of miscalculation and misunderstanding that could lead to conflict.

This does not mean that Iran’s rise as a nuclear power—with or without nuclear weapons—would be beneficial for the Middle East or the world generally. The risk of aggression or miscalculation remains and, when nuclear weapons are involved, the results are potentially catastrophic. However, short of forcing Iran to abandon its nuclear programme—an approach that can neither be justified nor afforded at present—the world needs to accept Iran as a nuclear power. This means the international community, and the US specifically, must work hard both to dissuade Iran from developing nuclear weapons and to reassure its neighbours that they do not need their own nuclear capabilities. This will be a difficult task, but recognising Iran as a legitimate regional power will mean that this approach offers some hope of success. Washington’s task now ‘is to create a situation in which Iran will find benefit in limiting its ambitions and in abiding by international norms. Dialogue, compromise,
and commerce, as difficult as they may be, are convincing means.\textsuperscript{153} In short, the world now has little choice but to use constructive engagement with Iran as the best means of encouraging this country to become a responsible member of the international community.

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