

# Iranian Nuclear issue in the Middle Eastern Order: Challenges or Opportunities for India

Abhay Kumar

Doctoral Degree, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi- 110067

Email: abhaykumar959@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *Iranian nuclear issue has been the most contentious issue in the Middle Eastern security structure and the one between the West and the Orient in contemporary times. However, the issue, academically, demands a mind free from all forms of prejudices to judge the real nature of the Iranian nuclear programme and its fallout on the region. The nuclear issue can revisit the existing security regime pushing the region into another chaos, while, at the same time can remain satisfied with the status quo. The issue presents a mixed bag for India and being an extended neighbour it needs to be extra-careful while calibrating policy towards it.*

**Key Words:** *Iran, Nuclear, US, West, Middle East, India, Revision, Equilibrium.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

US' withdrawal from JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) has brought forth the Iranian nuclear issue once again into international focus. Undoubtedly, a nuclear-armed Iran will inevitably push the existing security structures into flux, recalibrating the Middle Eastern strategic order. The contours of this increasingly nuclearized political landscape are shaped by a myriad of interlocking and complex factors. Naturally, Iran's nuclear programme is sure to elicit responses from US, Israel and a host of Arab states, most notably those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), particularly Saudi Arabia.

Nonetheless, the implications for regional stability ultimately hinge upon whether the Islamic Republic would go for a revisionist way or remain satisfied with status-quo. Suspicions, particularly from Israel and the GCC about threats of a Shia-led Iranian pursuit of regional hegemony is not ill-founded. However, it is necessary to draw upon a pluralist view of the nature of Iranian foreign policy, which suggests that Iran's nuclear program is reactionary in nature, nullifying the argument for Iran as an intrinsically revisionist state.

The article is structured in three broad parts. The first two parts represent the two possible consequences if Iran is going to have a nuclear weapon tomorrow. In the first case, there would be a wave of severe repercussion and in the second case, a new kind equilibrium would be achieved in the region. The third part specifically deals with the consequences of the Iranian nuclear issue for India. But before that, the paper has a short look at the Iranian nuclear program and the regional influence of Iran which makes its nuclear program of so much concern.

## 2. THE THREAT OF A NUCLEARISED IRAN:

The Iranian nuclear program was started with the help of the US itself under the Shah's regime for the civilian purpose to meet its energy needs.<sup>1</sup> But it moved toward a weapon program after the Islamic revolution, especially after 1990.<sup>2</sup> Over the last decade, it got momentum and simultaneously caught international attention, though, Iran asserts that its program is purely for civilian purpose.<sup>3</sup>

However, Iran's intentions are not difficult to discern as most analysts and observers agree that if Iran is seeking enriched fuel for nuclear energy and other civilian purposes, then it needs not to conceal an enrichment facility or restrict access of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to existing sites. Also, no country could afford to go through such severe economic sanction without any hidden agenda. Most of Iran's neighbours share the concern with the United States and the international community over the nature of Iran's nuclear program,<sup>4</sup> but some perceive it as a more imminent threat than others. Others recognise the threat but have competing economic and political interests that may prevent them from publicly expressing their concerns.

The Iranian regional influence explains why there is so much concern about Iran's nuclear program in the region. The vast territorial sway makes it natural hegemon in the region. Most of the countries in the region are artificial states imposed by colonial powers, while, Iran is an organic state with natural boundaries and strong nationalistic sense. This is the country which takes pride in its great culture and ruling machinery. Over the last more than 2000 years, except a few interruptions, it has kept the tradition of indigenous government and culture intact.<sup>5</sup> And, this great culture and

history bind its people in a single unitary state which is unique in the sense that most of the regional states today face anti-state movements and a kind of legitimacy crisis.

Besides its vast territorial overture, it has the ability to influence the domestic political circumstances of its neighbours and, thus, acts as a political spoiler for them. For some of Iran's neighbours, Iran's regional influence is a domestic political concern. For example, Bahrain and Kuwait—Gulf states with significant Shiite populations—often express concerns that Iran is fomenting unrest among Shiites, highlighting fears about their internal stability.<sup>6</sup> Defining the concept of 'Shia Crescent'<sup>7</sup> many analysts have cast events in the region as a power struggle between Sunni-ruled Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, and Shia ruled Iran and its allies and proxies, namely Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah. Iran is a country of considerable size and resources and, as a result, exerts a natural level of influence, both in positive and negative ways.

### 3. 1ST SCENARIO: THE PICTURE OF REVISION

This scenario predicts that if Iran succeeds to have a nuclear weapon, it will create a kind of wave of repercussion throughout the region. Iran once having nuclear weapon will go to revise the regional order in its favour and thus will invite an equal and opposite reactions from all major powers of the region. This kind of possibilities is strengthened by the series of statements it has been delivering against the other powers of the region. The rhetoric statements by Iran to export revolutions,<sup>8</sup> calling US 'Satan', to wipe out Israel from world map are enough to perceive Iran as an aspirant of revisionist state.<sup>9</sup>

The first reaction would be in the form of a nuclear race in the region. After Iran reaches the nuclear threshold, other countries in the Middle East and the Gulf region will seek to acquire nuclear weapons as well - either to deter a perceived Iranian threat or to counterbalance the enlarged political weight of Iran. The first and natural reaction would come from Saudi Arabia and Israel. Saudi Arabia which is seen as the leader of the Sunni regimes of the region and currently enjoying hegemonic status in the region will suffer most as Shi'ite Iran has been talking to export revolution in the region. It may use its close nexus with the Pakistani military and the financial and diplomatic clout over Pakistan to pursue a successful weapon program.<sup>10</sup> The consequence would be very much confirmation of the sharp Shia-Sunni divide of the region.

But Shia-Sunni divide is not the only factor to explain the complex interlocked dynamics of the region. Of course, it is one of the major factors of the region but along with it, there are many others too. The reaction from Israel becomes equally important. While for Saudi Arabia this is a matter of hegemonic status, for Israel it is the matter of survival.<sup>11</sup> The way Iran has been constantly pronouncing its intent to erase Israel from the world map, though it may be rhetoric only, has created a kind mistrust and fear in Israel which will never leave Israel in a position to tolerate Iran as a nuclear power. It may have the second-strike capability but it would not prefer to go for that because it may not have the chance to use it in time of real crisis due to its geopolitical size. Just a couple of strike is enough to wipe out Israel from the world map. Also, in a region where the security of the country is the security of the regime and such a large extent of communication gap exists between people and regime, the theory of deterrence capability does not work reliably.<sup>12</sup> That's why it is more concerned and more intent to go for a preventive strike against Iran before it will get a nuclear weapon. Other countries too will not be behind in this race. The Arab Republic of Egypt has frequently claimed to be a "virtual nuclear power" and therefore technically capable of developing nuclear bombs.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, it is said that Turkey, too, has already started the nuclear program.<sup>14</sup>

The destabilizing consequences of an increasing number of nuclear players in the Middle East are quite evident. A regional crisis could escalate and end in nuclear strikes. Deterrence, in the sense of a regime of mutual fears that encourages the countries involved not to use their nuclear weapons, has so far only prevailed in bilateral (United States-Soviet Union) or trilateral (China - India - Pakistan) relationships. Whether it will reliably work in a multilateral nuclear environment with four, five or more nuclear actors is an open question.<sup>15</sup>

The second consequence will be the danger of an increased danger of nuclear terrorism. If the leadership in Teheran feels deterred from using its nuclear weapons offensively, it could pass nuclear material or critical weapons components to surrogate terrorist groups. As Iran is thought to be the key sponsor of extremist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, the possibility that Teheran might provide Islamist terrorists with nuclear weapons seems to have some plausibility.<sup>16</sup> However, this nightmare of nuclear terrorism may be a western agenda only. No country would like to pass their nuclear assets to a group over which it has no control completely and which it acquired after such hardship and sacrifice. Also, the fear of nuclear terrorism comes from within a fragile country like Pakistan but the policy contrast of the West toward these two countries are very much evident to prove the double standard on the issue of nuclear terrorism.<sup>17</sup>

### 4. 2ND SCENARIO: STABILITY AT A NEW EQUILIBRIUM:

This possibility is based on the assumption that Iran's nuclear program is the natural reaction by a sovereign country. According to this approach, Iran's nuclear program is due to its insecurity feeling due to the presence of strong

alliances of the superpower US, a compatible Saudi Arabia and an aggressive Israel in the region.<sup>18</sup> Especially, the way a kind of encirclement around it has been done by the US over the last decade has made it feel more insecure. Besides already being present in the gulf, the US has encircled it more by entering in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>19</sup> The invasion of Iraq was a major march in this way and left no option for Iran except to go for a nuclear weapon. Only a nuclear deterrence could secure it against any possible US intervention.

In this scenario, pragmatic considerations would outweigh normative sentiments, and states would demonstrate a willingness to give up their maximalist preferences all around. Although the shift to a new modus operandi would be volatile, achieving stability at a new equilibrium point will be possible if the necessary political will be on all sides. The scenario assumes that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is due to its insecurity complex rather than regional hegemonic ambitions or religious ideology. The US invasion of Iraq has pushed Iran to try to achieve nuclear weapons even more rapidly as a guarantee against military intervention by the unilateralist United States. A withdrawal or decrease in the U.S. military presence in Iraq would purchase greater security for Iran.<sup>20</sup> The US inability to stabilize Iraq might create the possibility for cooperation with Iran to stabilize its neighbour.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, it is increasingly clear that no good military options exist to disarm a nuclearized state, whether it is a close U.S. ally such as Pakistan or a pariah like North Korea or Iran. Thus, from both U.S. and Iranian perspectives, a détente could make sense.

In this case and, most importantly, the United States and Iran, would have to settle for their second preference outcome. Tehran and Washington would strike a new grand bargain in the nuclear arena, with Tehran accepting strict limits to Iran's fissile material production in exchange for Washington accepting Iran's current nuclear capability, along with further cooperation in a range of fields.<sup>22</sup> This could be coupled with serious moves toward the stalled, but critical, Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.<sup>23</sup> The argument is that out of crisis comes opportunity.

Also to address insecurity senses of its allies and to prevent nuclear proliferation in West Asia and the Gulf and to keep the number of nuclear states as small as possible, the United States could expand their nuclear umbrella in the region.<sup>24</sup> Firm U.S. nuclear commitments such as those the non-nuclear allies in NATO or as Japan and South Korea received - could keep Saudi Arabia or Egypt from pursuing their nuclear plans. In the logic of this "extended deterrence" the nuclear powers promise to retaliate on behalf of their allies, should the latter suffer a nuclear attack.

## 5. LESSONS FOR INDIA:

Away from the Middle East, the issue significantly resonates through India's orientation towards the region and particularly Iran, its long-cherished partner in the regional diplomacy. Geopolitically, Iran can be considered as India's extended neighbourhood and it is the inherent part of India's vision for Afghanistan, West Asia, and Central Asia. Iran has an important location connecting West Asia, Central Asia and Eurasia through the North-South Corridor. Iran can also play an important role in India's approach to contain any hostile dominance in the Indian Ocean.

However, the nuclear issue of Iran and the voting by India against it at several international forums has disrupted the popular mood in both the countries. Subsequently, India has abandoned the idea of IPI gas pipeline and, in Afghanistan, India showed less interest to continue decade-long collaboration with Iran and decided to work in tandem with the US against the Iranian interests.<sup>25</sup> These two incidents dealt death blow to the nascent relation between these two nations. Reported Iranian decision to pull India out of Chabahar rail project is the expression of this new reality between these two countries.<sup>26</sup>

The current nuclear impasse and the virtual collapse of Nuclear Deal pose once again put a tough task for the diplomatic and economic overture of India. The restored sanction-regime would mean a catastrophic interruption in the energy supply from Iran. Private Indian refineries have already started reducing their import from Iran. Only some state refineries on the backup of Iranian tankers and insurance continue to import oil from Iran. Though possible Rupee-Rial mechanism can deflect some impact of sanctions, dwindling Rupee value and the higher oil-price can alienate a domestic constituency. If India continues to cut imports, Iran may reduce the number of Days-of-Credit to Indian companies.

Secondly, the sanctions can target Indian investment in Iran. India has promised \$6 billion Farzad B gas-project which is one of the largest overseas projects to be developed by India.<sup>27</sup> India has already invested heavily in Chabahar Port and planning to connect the port to Afghanistan via rail-link which is vital for India's strategy for Afghanistan. All these investments will be hampered if sanctions are imposed strictly.

The sanctioned Iran also hinders any attempt to boost strategic ties with Iran which is crucial for the stability of the Indian Ocean. Last year, New Delhi and Tehran vowed to step up maritime cooperation. Attempts are also being made for regular and institutionalized consultations between Indian and Iranian agencies on terrorism, organized crime, money laundering, drug trafficking, and cybercrime.<sup>28</sup> These interactions will now come under intense American scrutiny. Strategically, India's refusal to continue oil import can further push Iran to the Chinese periphery. Iran has already threatened to invite China to develop Chabahar port which is against the very vision of India for Chabahar project.<sup>29</sup>

However, contrary to the popular perceptions the nuclear issue and the sanction-regime also bring significant opportunities to India to realize its interest in the region.<sup>30</sup> Due to sanctions, India will continue to pay in rupee saving its scarce foreign deposits. Balance thus acquired by Iran will be used to finance Indian export to Iran which is crucial to our already deficit-strained Balance of Payment (BOP) account. Besides these, since rupee is not fully convertible in the international market, it can't replace dollar or euro to finance its nuclear program which is the main concern of the West.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

After the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCOPA) was struck in 2015, Iran has been assertive in its dealing with India. Iran is now assisting Taliban in tandem with Pakistan and Russia against the Indian interests there in Afghanistan. Iran also wants China to involve in the further development of the Chabahar Port.<sup>31</sup> The recent delay in receiving a loan from India for the port can be cited here. Iran is the part of proposed One Belt One Road (OBOR) and has been actively pursuing China to invest in the revival of old Silk Route. The delay in finalizing Farzad B gas project to India can be seen as the fallout of changing geopolitics after the deal was struck. Iran has also renewed its overtone in case of pricing and return for the export of oil and gas.<sup>32</sup> However, all these alternatives would be no longer available if the US continues to impose sanctions and label Iran as a pariah state. Besides these, India can also use its leverage on sanctioned Iran for better oil-pricing from Saudi Arabia and UAE which is crucial for its deficit-hit economy.

The paper argues that the Iranian nuclear program may not necessarily result in a catastrophically dramatic recasting of regional alliances, power dynamics, and identity complexes as has been talked about a lot. Iran once having nuclear power may remain status quo with an assurance of no intervention either from any regional power or the US. Iran knows the consequence of nuclear or even a convention war for it. It may cause some damage to its opponents but in return, it would be hard for it to exist as a state. It might have seen the might of American bombs in Iraq in 2003. Only a crazy Iran could dare to face those bombs.

But reaching a new equilibrium point, however, will not be an easy process. Given the fact, this highly volatile region is based on complex interlocking factors with full of mistrust and tussle any disturbance in the balance of checked tension would incur serious wave of repercussion throughout the whole region. Iranian nuclear program may be accommodative but as one prepares for the worst in the international politics we can't deny the possibility of a nuclear race in the region. The way the US extended its nuclear umbrella over Europe and assured it is not looking to work in this region because the US is not so much integrated with this region as it was with Europe during the Cold War.

As far India concerns in this security architecture and the uncertainties around it, it would be prudent to make sense of some basics of geopolitics between India and Iran. Both nations need each other but for different reasons. India needs Iran for constant energy supply and the investment opportunities for its burgeoning entrepreneurship. India is comfortable with US-led unipolar world. However, Iran needs India only to deflect increasing hostility from the US. Iran finds no convergence with the objectives of Indian foreign policy: Today, both are on opposite sides in Afghanistan. Why it would allow a passage to India when it, itself, wants to be the sole gateway to Central Asia. Iran does not concern Chinese expansion; in fact, it wants a more active role of China in the region. Above all, once the sanctions are lifted the pariah state will get more consumers for its energy and better expertise for the development of its economic hot-spot.

Further dismay to India, both China and Russia too voted against Iran at several times despite the fact that they have veto power to prevent any punitive action Iran. But they are not at the periphery of Iranian foreign policy like India does today. India is middle-ranged power and must be focused on its capabilities and needs. It must not fall in temptation to some vague 'moral autonomy' and must set foreseeable pragmatic priorities without missing an opportunity to deepen and correct its approach to Iran which it fails to do when the door was wide open in the past.

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