

COMMENTARY

No.113

Friday, 25 April 2013

Mastering the Nuclear Chess Game

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Iran may have not invented Chess, but it has nevertheless demonstrated unsurpassed skills in playing the nuclear chess game against the P5+1 (US, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany) and especially against the US. From the time it was discovered that Iran was operating a clandestine nuclear weapons program nearly two decades ago, Tehran has successfully outmanoeuvred the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) while making significant advances in its research and development of its nuclear program.

Based on credible intelligence provided by the US and Israel, it is now believed that Iran is on the verge of acquiring the technology to assemble nuclear weapons in short order, or what is termed as “reaching the point of no return” within a year, according to US estimates made public in early March 2013. Tehran was able to advance to this level in spite of intense international pressure and mounting sanctions that have caused tremendous domestic economic pain and dislocation.

To prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, we should have a better understanding of Iran’s motivation behind its pursuance of a nuclear program and accordingly the negotiating strategy it has so dexterously pursued to achieve its objective.

In so doing, the Obama administration would be in a better position to assess what coercive measures are left at its disposal before resorting to the use of force, which is the least desirable option. There are several factors behind Iran’s nuclear ambitions:

For most Iranians the ability to acquire nuclear weapons provides a significant boost to their national pride. Historically, Iran (Persia) was a major power and many Iranians still yearn for the glory of the past, especially now that its historic rival Iraq (Babylon) has fallen under its sway.

Iran is situated in a dangerous and unstable neighbourhood, with Pakistan and India in possession of nuclear weapons and Afghanistan in turmoil. A nuclear Iran will make it a credible power to be reckoned with, forcing other nations to carefully consider its strategic interests.

Iran's national security concerns and sense of vulnerability in view of its enmity to US and regional concerns provide a powerful incentive to possess a nuclear arsenal and deter other countries from threatening its national security.

Iran is fully aware that nuclear powers are seldom challenged and prevent even traditional enemies in possession of nuclear weapons, such as the situation between India and Pakistan, from engaging in violent confrontation; North Korea offers a telling example.

A nuclear Iran would promote its ambition to become the region's hegemon and substantially increase its influence over the much smaller Arab states in the area while amplifying its ability to intimidate its neighbours to follow its dictate.

In addition to having huge oil reserves, by joining the club of nuclear powers Iran would command international respect and allow it to become a global player that transcends Middle Eastern affairs.

Iran is determined to neutralize Israel's nuclear advantage, and views the acquisition of nuclear weapons central to achieving this strategic objective.

As the only nuclear Shiite state, Iran would have a decisive advantage against its deadly rivals, the Sunni Arab world, as demonstrated by its unwavering support of Syria's Assad regime to safeguard its Shiite crescent stretching from the Mediterranean to the Gulf.

Finally, Shiite Islam plays a significant role, as many Iranians believe that the return of the Mahdi (which is weaved in Iran's foreign policy) will occur only under an apocalyptic event that will lead to the world's domination by Islam. A nuclear Iran is seen as a prerequisite in this regard.

In considering the above, it becomes clear why Iran pursues a negotiating strategy that fully corresponds to its objective to acquire nuclear weapons, and does so under extremely difficult conditions while demonstrating unsurpassed negotiating skills.

Playing for time: The Iranians are known to play for time and have successfully done so for more than a decade, especially because the P5+1 and particularly the US have not established and enforced a strict time limitation to the negotiating process.

Divide and conquer: Although the P5+1 want to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, Russia (nuclear technology) and China (oil) have different interests in Iran. Tehran has cleverly exploited the divergent interests of the six powers to its full advantage.

Making bogus compromises: Often, the Iranian representatives make certain concessions only to be reversed by Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, or withdraw altogether from the negotiating table to throw off their counterparts.

Sending mixed messages: It is customary for the Iranian negotiating representative to suggest a willingness to engage in serious negotiations but come to the talks with little or no offers to deliberately mislead and obscure their real intentions.

Demanding unacceptable compromises: The Iranians are known to offer conditional concessions in exchange, for example, lifting the sanctions first, knowing that it would simply be rejected in frustration by the US—a technique that allows Tehran to maintain the prospect of a diplomatic solution while it continues to advance its nuclear program.

Assuming positional bargaining: Iran has insisted that its right to enrich uranium on its soil is non-negotiable even though it is a non-starter for Washington, who along with Israel completely distrusts Tehran's ultimate intentions.

Emulating North Korea: Notwithstanding the harsh international sanctions, Iran continues to defy the international community with near impunity by borrowing a page or two from the North Korean textbook to create the fact of their nuclear weapons while testing the US' resolve.

Engaging in systematic deceit: Iran has regularly engaged in deceit and like quicksilver, it has been near impossible to pin it down to any proposal put on the table. This explains Iran's refusal to allow the IAEA to inspect several suspected nuclear facilities, including Parchin and Fordow military bases.

Threatening massive retaliation: Finally, Iran mastered the art of using negotiations as a tool to advance its nuclear program while threatening to retaliate against the US and its allies, instilling a deep sense of global concerns should the conflict lead to a military confrontation.

The Obama administration should know by now that incremental sanctions (however painful) have failed, diplomacy will run its course sooner than later, if it has not already, and seeking a breakthrough through incentives has proven futile.

Meanwhile, Iran will continue to push forward with uranium enrichment and may well get to the point where North Korea currently stands, though without making bellicose statements or threatening its neighbours in order to deny the US the justification to attack its nuclear facilities.

To prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, a narrow window of opportunity remains for only a short period of time, provided that the US make four immediate and simultaneous moves:

First, impose real, crippling sanctions along the lines of preventing Iran from importing refined gasoline (40 per cent coming from India), creating economic havoc and popular unrest. Second, the US should take additional and unambiguous measures toward military preparedness, sending

a clear signal to Tehran that as President Obama said and Joe Biden reiterated, the President of the US does not bluff.

Third, the administration should make it clear that while it cooperates with Israel, it is in no position to prevent Jerusalem from unilaterally striking Iran once Tehran comes close to the point of no return. Tehran is particularly concerned about Israel, who would be more eager to attack its nuclear facilities and draw the US into the military foray.

Finally, the Obama administration should secretly engage Iran in bilateral negotiations to end the nuclear impasse. Iran must fully understand that failing to reach an agreement in these talks will have dire consequences including regime change, which is the only concern that trumps Tehran's desire to acquire nuclear weapons.

This would provide Iran with a face-saving way out, as Tehran has always denied any intention of acquiring nuclear weapons. Should such an agreement be reached, it could then be announced through the P5+1 talks or the IAEA.

Otherwise, the US will be left with two extremely bad choices: First, they can settle for containing Iran's nuclear weapon program by developing an elaborate new regional security umbrella to deter Iran, which Israel may nevertheless reject. Second, President Obama will live up to his commitment to strike Iran's nuclear facilities with all of its unforeseen consequences.

In either scenario the US will only take out the Queen, but on the Iranian nuclear chess board the King will remain standing.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/mastering-the-nuclear-chess-game/>

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