

TEHRAN : Contributed Feature : Prospects Of A Nuclear- Armed Iran.

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Providing a new perspective on Iran's strive for advanced nuclear technology, Abolghasem Bayyenat asks whether the world's fears of a potentially nuclear-armed Iran are justified.

Although Iranian and EU officials have recently agreed to resume talks on Iran's nuclear activities, there is little optimism that such talks would lead to any breakthrough in the existing deadlock over Iran's nuclear program. As senior Iranian diplomats and nuclear negotiators have remarked, Iran is well determined to develop its own nuclear fuel cycle domestically despite Western countries' threats to refer its nuclear case to the UN Security Council for possible economic sanctions and/or other coercive measures.

Western foreign policy think tanks and intelligence centers have speculated that if Iran is allowed to resume its uranium enrichment activities and other related sensitive nuclear works, it might be able to build nuclear weapons within a period ranging from 5 to 10 years. Given such a possibility, Western politicians and political analysts have warned against the repercussions of the nuclearization of Iran over the security and political stability of the region and the world. The dramatization of the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran has resulted in the adoption of a tough and unwarranted position by Western countries vis-a-vis the Iranian nuclear issue. This factor is what accounts for the current stand-off between Iran and the West over the recent resumption of partial nuclear fuel cycle activities by Iran.

The frequently cited fears about the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran are that Iran might use nuclear weapons in a first strike against its adversaries in the region or, if equipped with advanced delivery systems, in other parts of the world or that nuclear weapons might slip into the hands of terrorist groups dedicated to harming the Western nations. But one might also wonder whether such fears are well-founded or to what extent the threat of a suspected would-be nuclear-armed Iran might have been exaggerated?. And finally, how reliable would a hypothetically nuclear-armed Iran be?

Most Western politicians and observers justify their attitude towards the Iranian nuclear activities based on the character of the Iranian regime. They remain skeptical of the reliability of Iran as a responsible member of the international community and often refer to the early revolutionary and fanatic behavior of the regime in Iran as reasonable grounds for suspicion. The climate of mutual mistrust has further aggravated since the new fundamentalist government, headed by the hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nezhad, took over in Iran, thus fuelling further anxiety over Iran's nuclear activities. While such observations might sit well with the prevailing image of Iran portrayed by the media in the West, there are serious flaws with their reasoning.

First, it would be a mistake to think that the character of the Iranian government has remained unchanged since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In fact the Islamic Republic has lost much of its revolutionary and ideological fervor over the past two decades and has developed into more of a pragmatist government. Iran's foreign policy is an area which has seen moderation and pragmatism in a more salient way and where national interests and strategic calculations have taken

precedence over ideological considerations.

Iran's determination to maintain close relations with Russia serves as a conspicuous example in this regard. As part of a policy mainly aimed at giving priority to its strategic ties with Russia above every thing else, Iran has kept silent over the suppression of Chechnian Muslim separatists and the violation of human rights by the Russian army in Chechnya. In a similar development in the mid 1990s, Iran and Russia used their influence on the Tajik Islamist opposition group and the secular former communist government of Tajikistan respectively to put an end to the long-lasting civil conflict in that country, a nation with which Iran enjoys common cultural and linguistic bonds. Iran's pragmatic decision to broker a peace deal in collaboration with Russia, between the Tajik warring parties rather than insisting on its support for the Islamist militants' cause to install an Islamic government in Tajikistan helped forestall tensions in its growing ties with Russia.

Iran's cordial relations with Christian Armenia despite its military conflict with Muslim Azerbaijan and their continuing territorial disputes also stands in contrast to the prevailing view that Iran's foreign policy is driven by religious and ideological considerations. Iran's position towards the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, for which it has come under harsh criticism by some political groups in other fellow Muslim countries including Azerbaijan itself, also manifests the important role of overriding national interests in the foreign policy decision-making of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Other notable examples demonstrating the precedence of rational choice over ideology in the foreign policy of Iran is its largely neutral stance vis-a-vis the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. This position has enabled Iran to secure its national interests through maintaining good relations with both sides. The ongoing negotiations between Iran, India and Pakistan over a multi-billion dollar project to export Iranian natural gas to India via a pipeline crossing Pakistan is the most prominent concrete gain resulting from this policy.

Another major development which represents a departure from ideological tendencies to pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy is the normalization of its relations in recent years with the conservative pro-Western nations in the region. The easing of political tensions in the region has resulted in the expansion of economic relations between Iran and its neighbors, indicating Iran's desire to give priority to creating a favorable climate in the region for pursuing its economic development goals.

Iran also played an effective role in helping the Afghan opposition groups, allied with the US forces, to topple the Taliban regime in neighboring Afghanistan. It has also significantly contributed to the development of democratic processes in post-conflict Afghanistan and Iraq and has undertaken substantial financial responsibilities for the reconstruction of both countries. These two experiences demonstrate that Iran has been willing to collaborate with even hostile states, such as the US, in areas of common strategic interests. A similar process has been going on for years between Iran and the European Union on fighting drug-trafficking originating in Afghanistan, for which Iran has paid dearly in both human lives and financial terms.

The only major issue which runs counter to the mainstream pragmatic trend in Iran's foreign policy is its hard-line stance towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given the popularity of the Palestinian cause among Muslims in the region and around the world, Iran's policy towards the Palestinian issue is in a large measure shaped by its desire to gain popularity before the Muslim public opinion worldwide.

The recent controversial comments made by President Ahmadinejad with regard to Israel are to be interpreted in line with the above observation and be regarded as a tactic to appeal to the sentiments of the masses in Muslim countries. However Iran's actions have mainly remained confined to verbal and propaganda-style opposition rather than taking any significant practical measures to undermine the Middle East peace process.

Second, the notion of Iran launching a first-strike nuclear attack against any of its adversaries is out of the question since all its potential target countries are already either in possession of nuclear weapons or are under the nuclear umbrella of other powers.

Given the viable retaliatory nuclear capability of such countries, any nuclear attack by Iran would correspond to a mutually-assured destruction scenario. Rationality would dictate that a hypothetical nuclear weapon capability just serve as a deterrent force against potential aggressors for Iran.

Third, while it would be controversial to argue against simply possessing nuclear weapons for deterrent purposes from a religious perspective, given the indiscriminate destructive nature of nuclear weapons, any nuclear attack against civilian population centers would definitely be against the ethical teachings of Islam. This consideration should serve as a check against a hypothetically nuclear-armed Iran misusing its nuclear weapon capabilities.

Fourth, there are no credible grounds to fear that Iran might arm terrorist groups with nuclear weapons to attack Western nations.

Itself a long-time victim of terrorist attacks, Iran should feel no sympathy with terrorist groups who disapprove of its Shiite and Persian identity and whom it blasts for tarnishing the image of Islam through their extremist and violent acts. Iran is often referred to by visiting Western journalists as having the most pro-Western youth population in the region. While I would neither confirm nor reject this claim, what is evident is that none of the Iranian citizens have ever been implicated in any terrorist acts conducted in Western countries in recent years.

Finally, as a nation which has no record of military adventurism and aggression against any of its neighbors in the contemporary history, there is nothing to suggest that a hypothetically nuclear-armed Iran would be any less reliable than any other actual nuclear states in the region. In fact while the world comes to terms with a nuclear-armed Pakistan, India, Israel and others, it would make little sense, if any, to overplay the threat of a suspected would-be nuclear-armed Iran. The discriminatory enforcement of nuclear non-proliferation regime in the region is not expected to lead to a sustainable outcome.

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