

IS A NEW WAR AGAINST IRAN INEVITABLE?*

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The situation around Iran is getting worse and more dangerous. Although there is nothing new in the crisis around Iran's nuclear program, its escalation has never been so strong and the rhetoric so overheated. The reason for this escalation can be explained by two overlapping processes – the growing concerns about proliferation of WMD, on the one hand, and the consequences of the Arab spring that resulted in structural changes in the region, on the other hand. Iran aspires to superpower status. The weakness of the Arab regimes, the lack of an Arab power centre in the region, the US decline in the Middle East are bringing Iran closer to this goal.¹

Neither Israel, nor USA, nor Russia and other great powers want a war in the region. The only exception can be some neighbors of Iran who regard it as the biggest threat to their security interests. But we know from the past experience that wars often happen even against political will. Addressing the main question formulated in the title of this presentation I would say: a war in the Persian Gulf is unavoidable, if Iran does not strictly fulfill five UNSC resolutions in a year or a year and a half.

Iran's nuclear program is not peaceful

The creeping crisis over Iran's nuclear program is lasting for almost 10 years. Many outside players have made unforgivable mistakes. First and foremost the US under the Bush administration in 2002-2003, when there was a chance to resolve the Iranian nuclear problems with peaceful means. The US aggression against Iraq in 2003 undermined the Afghan operation and destroyed the main counterbalance to Iran. The recent military action in Libya has only aggravated the situation in the region. It dealt a heavy blow to the international cooperation on Iran and discredited the very concept of a humanitarian intervention.

The November 2011 IAEA report warned that Iran appeared to be on a structured path to building a nuclear weapon. Russia vehemently criticized a U.N. nuclear watchdog report saying it contained no new evidence and was being used to undercut efforts to reach a diplomatic solution.

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¹ Iran Targets Yemen - Michael Segall - Vol. 12, No. 9, <http://www.jcpa.org/>.

The advocates of Iran defend two incompatible theses. First, there is no reason to doubt that Iran's program is not peaceful. And second, since Israel possesses nuclear weapons, Iran has a right to acquire nuclear weapons that are needed for political containment of a possible outside aggression as well as for security and stability in the region.

As for the first thesis about Iran's rationale for "peaceful" nuclear fuel cycle it does not hold water.

- The quantity of its reactors- two research reactors and Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant- does not require Iran to have a full parallel nuclear fuel cycle.

- Moreover, indigenous fuel cycle costs are substantially greater than importing nuclear fuel at market prices...or taking full advantage of its current wasted hydrocarbon resources. I would like to remind that the current stage of the crisis is rooted in 2009, when Iran rejected the proposal of processing its low-enriched uranium in Russia and France for its use in the Tehran Research Reactor under IAEA safeguards. If Iran's nuclear program had been peaceful this proposal would have perfectly suited its interests. The very fact that the Russia-France initiative was rejected by Tehran confirmed the worst suspicions about its intentions.

- Iran's ballistic missiles have low accuracy and their existence can be justified only if they carry nuclear warheads.

As for the second thesis, except for the US which was the first to acquire nuclear weapons, all other nuclear haves were justifying their nuclear arsenals with considerations of political containment of an outside nuclear aggression or a big conventional war. However, it would be worthwhile to remind that the most serious crisis in the USSR-USA relations - Caribbean crisis of 1962 -was provoked by the very existence of nuclear weapons. And Israel's nuclear weapons did not prevent the Yom Kippur War started in 1973 by Egypt and Syria.

And it would be appropriate to ask the advocates of Iran's nuclear weapons in Russia if the Baltic states, Georgia and Ukraine have a right to acquire nuclear weapons because Russia is a nuclear state? With this logic the world would become a nuclear chaos. And in my view legitimate does not mean necessarily right or good.

It goes without saying that Iran's nuclear weapons would do away with NPT, trigger a chain reaction of proliferation not too far from Russia's borders. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other countries will follow the Iranian scenario. Their nuclear forces will be more primitive and vulnerable than those of NWS which means that these countries will be much more prone to first use of nuclear forces. Aside from this most of the states that would like to go nuclear are unstable political regimes, prone to extremism and adventurism. This state of affairs increases the probability of nuclear terrorism that cannot be prevented by any BMD system.

Point of no return

The wide-spread opinion is that Iran wants only to reach a nuclear threshold to get a strong trump card in its relationships with the regional countries, with the US and other great powers sending them a message that it could easily cross this threshold because the latter is not a line but rather a certain phase of a nuclear program. According to some estimates, using only 1,5 tons of LEU, enriching it to 20 per cent and moving from 20 to 90 per cent, Iran would be able to produce 20 kilograms of weapons grade uranium needed for one nuclear warhead. And Iran possesses 5 tons of LEU.²

What next? Since Iran has already reached a nuclear threshold, it can easily cross it at any point. It won't be very difficult for Tehran to find a pretext and withdraw from NPT. Even if it happens without any immediate reaction from the outside world, a war against Iran will be only postponed for a year or two. But then it will start anyway and in this case it will be a regional war with nuclear weapons. Aside from direct negative consequences for the region, such a conflict will split Russia and the West for a long time and result in a new cold war.

At the same time it is confusing that technical aspects of the Iranian problem prevail over its political dimension. Among 193 UN member-states there is only one state Iran, which officially says that Israel should be erased from the political map of the world. It is exactly this position of Iran, its direct threat to the very existence of Israel not only technical aspects that should be the main reason for a strong international response.

Seven years of diplomatic efforts did not bring any tangible results being only a smokescreen for Iran to incrementally achieve its main goal. Instead of 164 centrifuges Iran has 10,000 centrifuges and the whole complex of other military systems and projects. Only a consolidated position of the UNSC members based on the UN Charter Article 41 or 42³ if needed could stop Iran and prevent a new war in the Persian Gulf. It was brave on the behalf of the EU that currently buys about 20% of Iran's oil exports to ban this January new contracts on oil import from Iran and to end existing contracts by 1 July 2012. The weak point of this decision is

² Is a breakthrough possible on Iran's nuclear issue?

<http://mideastreality.blogspot.com/2012/01/is-breakthrough-possible-on-irans.html>

³ Article 41: The Security Council may decide what measures not involving the use of armed force are to be employed to give effect to its decisions, and it may call upon the Members of the United Nations to apply such measures. These may include complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations.

Article 42: Should the Security Council consider that measures provided for in Article 41 would be inadequate or have proved to be inadequate, it may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. Such action may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations.

that the purpose of the EU sanctions is "to put pressure on Iran to come back to the negotiating table" but not to comply with the UN resolutions.

The Russia-Iran relationships

At first glance Russia's position on Iran looks controversial. However it has its internal logic. There is no doubt that Russia does not want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, for security and political reasons. Moreover, Russia is not supportive of Iran's development of a full nuclear fuel cycle – both for security and commercial considerations.⁴ However, this is not an issue for practical policymaking. In the Kremlin's decision-making process, the real issue comes down to what measures (and sacrifices in other policy interests) are tolerable when pressuring Iran on the matter of the fuel cycle. At the same time, unlike the United States, Russia has huge political and economic interests with Iran. Iran is one of the main recipients of Russian peaceful nuclear technology and arms sales. Also, Iran is seen as a geopolitical counterbalance to the expanding influence of Turkey, the United States, and Islamic Wahhabism in the South and North Caucasus and Central Asia. Finally, Iranian oil and gas resources are a lucrative target for future Russian investment.

Therefore, Russia has been searching for ways of settlement without sanctions and the use of force.⁵ For seven years Russia was trying to play a role of a "middleman" between Iran and the West. But Russia's efforts on many occasions were misused by Tehran. Iran did not simply inform Russia about its new enrichment plant near Qom. The USA and the West at large are getting more skeptical about Russia's potential to influence Iran.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, which is one of the main attributes of Russia's great power status, Moscow is vitally interested in strengthening the UN global role. Iran's under carpet games are undermining the role of the UN and consequently that of Russia, one of the leading states in the Security Council.

No doubt, Russia is interested in good relations with Iran but with two important reservations. **First**, Iran should be interested in such relations more than Russia. We could survive without Iran but Iran without Russia will be confronted with many existential problems.

Second, our relations with Iran are important but not at any cost. NPT and non-proliferation regime as well as the UN role and our international prestige are far more important than good relations with Iran.

⁴ Alexei Arbatov, Russia and Iranian Nuclear Crisis at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2006/05/23/russia-and-iranian-nuclear-crisis/42x>

⁵ thinkexist.com/.../iran...position.../1137637

Nobody, except some adventurers, wants a war against Iran. Its economic and political damage would overbalance all commercial and tactical considerations. If Iran does not show wisdom and flexibility, Russia won't be able to do anything and a new war will be unavoidable.