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## **Nuclear Proliferation of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Challenging the Balance of Power in the Middle East**

*Few topics in international relations consistently attract as much academic and policy interest as nuclear proliferation. Literature on the subject tends to focus on the following questions: Why do states seek nuclear weapons? How do they acquire the components necessary to build them? What are the consequences of nuclear proliferation? Does nuclear proliferation change the balance of power? These issues will remain salient in the years to come as the Iranian nuclear weapon programme continues, heightening the crisis between regional leading states.*

*Keywords: Nuclear Proliferation; Iran's Nuclear Weapons Programme; Balance of Power in the Middle East.*

Warfare typically involves offensive and defensive actions. During the history of warfare these actions were carried out by using swords and shields, to cite a famous example. There are two basic types of defensive measures – passive (a fortress, for example, especially one high ground or surrounded by a moat or ramparts) and active (like arrows or cannon balls launched from the fortress to break up enemy formations). Today these types of defence systems can be similarly classified: Firstly, passive - anti-aircraft and anti-rocket defensive systems both can be considered as a surface-to-air missile (SAM) system; and secondly, active –projectiles shot by mortars, artillery shells fired by guns and howitzers or even guided ballistic missiles which can be launched from fixed or mobile launchers (vehicle, aircraft, ship or submarine). Up to the twentieth century, the development of military technology was slow and gradual; however, the creation of nuclear weapons and emergence of guided ballistic missiles has brought with it a new era of warfare. In this era, possession of nuclear weapons does not guarantee an advantage from a military perspective. Nevertheless, this view is sceptical that the net influence of nuclear weapons should not be misinterpreted as endorsement of any proposition suggesting an essential irrelevance of those weapons to statecraft and strategy (Lakoff, 2007). To be nuclear-armed probably does not add to a country's strong influence in the world, but it will under certain conditions really matter. A country's nuclear arms will discourage an adversary from interference in internal affairs by a state which is well armed conventionally, while those nuclear arms mean that one is fundamentally protected against intimidation by the nuclear arms of others. According to one of the leading theories of geopolitics in the nuclear era Robert Jervis, the "theory of the nuclear revolution," nuclear weapons are the ultimate instruments of deterrence, protecting those who possess them from invasion or other major attacks. Nuclear-armed states thus have good reason to engage in intense competition, even if their own arsenals are currently secure (Jervis, 1989). As a leading neorealist John Mearsheimer noted about the Cold War nuclear arms competition:

The continuation of the arms race was not misguided, even though nuclear superiority remained an elusive goal. In fact, it made good strategic sense for the United States and the Soviet Union to compete vigorously in the nuclear realm, because military technology tends to develop rapidly and in unforeseen ways (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Stated differently, nuclear weapons are the best tools of deterrence ever created, but the possibility of the development of anti-ballistic missile systems and the fear that the opponent might do the same, which explains why nuclear weapons have not affected states behaviour in the international politics. And yet, nuclear weapons have made all-out war between nuclear armed states virtually unthinkable.

When a state acquires nuclear capabilities, it challenges the existing status quo. States seeking nuclear weapons might try to sidestep these technological and political hurdles by buying, rather than making, the weapons (and despite strong rates of economic growth in case of Iran, its struggle to establish high-quality state bureaucracies is challenging ) (Hymans, 2012). Seven states with nuclear weapons (United States, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, France and People's Republic of China, India and Pakistan) developed nuclear weapon programme before 1970, and all seven succeeded in relatively short period of time. The average timeline for the development of nuclear weapon programme before 1970 was about 7 years, and after 1970 has been about 17. In the intensifying crisis over Iran's nuclear activity, its nuclear proliferation, has slowed down. This slowing tendency of nuclear proliferation clearly indicates the risk of premature conclusion that Iran's nuclear weapon programme is about to achieve its ultimate goal.

From the country's socio-political perspective, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a unique state; a non-Arab (and non-Arabic-speaking) state in the Middle East with its own ancient history and culture and a distinctive political style. It is the only Shiite theocracy in the world. It has both a revolutionary regime and a deeply traditional and conservative society. Iran does not yield easily to the standard tools of Western politics. It demonstrated the most significant developments in the modern history of the Middle East, which has led to a vivid transformation its political system. Since its outbreak, the revolution has attracted a great deal of public opinion, as well as the interest of scholars, the media and policy-makers worldwide. More than two decades after the revolution, the Iran remains in many aspects a mystery. The power structure, decision-making process and politics of the Islamic regime are far from clear, and the competition over the revolutionary path is not yet decided. Moreover, the main developments under discussion seem to have reached a new, more complex peak. A leading Iranian expert David Menashri noted this about Iran's modern history that:

The principles of the revolutionary philosophy and politics are now being examined in a fierce and open debate about religion and state, Islam and politics, Islam and democracy, state interest versus revolutionary ideology, and Iran's relations with the outside world (Menashri, 2010).

Yet, more than last two decades, Iran's theocracy is still searching for an applicable track to cope with the challenge of governance while adjusting its idealistic Islamic vision to evolving realities of severe social and economic difficulties (Menashri, 2010).

At the same time, Iran continues to be influenced by the changing patterns of regional politics. Political decision-making process in Iran, as mentioned above is very complex. Some of the decisions have opened new opportunities, but others have confronted Tehran with serious challenges and severe dilemmas in the region. The current regime has viewed its victory as an instrument of an overall change in the world of Islam - a model for imitation by other non-Shia Muslim states. For revolutionary Iran, the most natural arena for expanding its ties was among neighbouring Muslim states, particularly in the Persian Gulf. Yet historical antagonism with neighbours, cultural uniqueness from Arabs and Turks, sectarian differences from Sunnis and ideological or political differences from other Muslim states, as well as strategic and economic interests made it difficult to promote such goal. Certainly the fact that Iran and its neighbours shared the same faith did not create mutual trust between them (as the war with Iraq in 1980s). The heritage of the past and the conflicting interests of more recent times has led to tension with Israel, Saudi Arabia and or Turkey. However, along with major policy changes in Iran and while basic disagreements were not resolved, there have been clear signs of improving ties with Iran's Arab neighbours in recent years.

A revolutionary theocracy and major world oil supplier, Iran has always demanded recognition as a regional power seeking to lead the Muslim world competing Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In this regard, Iran took advantage of the revolts that have had spread throughout the Arab world from 2010 for at least five years in order to enhance its influence in the Middle East. As a neorealist Kenneth Waltz predicts:

There will be a massive shift in the balance of power in the region, with Iran moving to a dominant power. Perhaps the greatest fear among Iran's neighbours is that a nuclear capability will embolden Iran to more aggressively intervene and influence the broader region (Waltz, 2012)

Here, Israel's regional nuclear monopoly should be considered as major driving force, which has proved remarkably stable for the past four decades and has long fuelled self-resilience in the Middle East. There is no other region in the world with a single and unrestrained nuclear state like Israel. Given the centrality of Iran's nuclear issue to regional geopolitics and nuclear proliferation, this attention is not surprising. However, without a clearer grasp of the underpinnings of power and leadership in Iran, our understanding of the nuclear issue will be unsatisfactory and incomplete. Teheran's determination to pursue its nuclear weapons programme, despite economic hardship and international outrage is top priority (Pollack, 2011). What are Iran's motives in seeking nuclear technology in reality? The official story is that they are not seeking weapons

but merely peaceful nuclear power (Byman & Green, 2012). It is true that Iran lacks oil refining capability, but it is doubtful that one of the world's main oil-producing countries believes it needs nuclear energy when this technology of power generation has been a costly, dangerous failure elsewhere (Byman & Green, 2012). From the perspective of scholars and policy-makers of the West, under the current Islamic regime Iran is considered to be an impulsive and disturbing force in the Middle East, fully capable of affect stability in a variety of spheres. But it is not clear that constructing a confrontation bloc will make Iran in their support for its nuclear policy. A more comprehensive approach that builds gradually nuclear capabilities may be more effective for justifying the danger from both a nuclear Iran and the reactions of neighbours.

Iran's nuclear weapons programme has emerged not just as an important aspect of the country's foreign relations but increasingly as a defining element of its national identity. And the reasons for pursuing the programme have changed as it has matured. However, obtaining nuclear capabilities is unlikely to help Iran achieve its political aims, because nuclear weapons, by definition, are such a narrow category of arms that they can accomplish specific objectives from the military viewpoint, like deterrence from Israel or defence from other countries with a stronger conventional arms. A nuclear Iran would undeniably shift the balance of power in the Middle East; and Iran will try to press the presumed advantages of its newfound capability. Iran is a critical state in international relations because of its natural resources, its strategic location, its controversial conservative Islamic regime and its effect on shifting the balance of power in the Middle East. As a result, Iran is facing pressure from all sides. Internationally, Iran has been accused of being a state sponsor of terrorism and has been labelled by the George W. Bush Administration as a member of the "Axis of Evil" which also included Iraq and North Korea. The term "Axis of Evil" was first used by United States President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, and often repeated throughout his presidency, to describe governments that his administration accused of sponsoring terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. Since, the United States invaded Iraq and is confronting North Korea, Tehran had no option other than investing in its self-preservation and went forward with the development of its nuclear weapons programme. Iran is the sole regional great power today in the Middle East, and it is relatively more powerful today than at any time in modern history. Given all these factors, it is reasonable to say that Iran's growing power is possibly challenging situation that the world will face the coming years in the Middle East. Instead of the direct threat of nuclear attack, there is greater concern about a nuclear-armed, or even a nuclear-capable, Iran sparking a regional arms race and compelling others to develop their own indigenous nuclear weapons programme.

The critical issue facing Iran today is its nuclear stand-off with the international community. While this point is self-evident, what is often not is that the resolution of this crisis is likely to affect profoundly the future course of the Iran, not just in terms of its foreign policy, but also in terms of its internal affairs, its economy, and potentially even the nature of the state itself. It is for this reason that nuclear stand-off has the potential to shape Iran's future in areas far beyond the traditional security sphere. The stakes are so high for Tehran, that the Iranian nuclear issue has the potential to break the deadlock in Iranian politics and hand over control of the government, inevitably entailing major shifts in policy on a variety of other critical matters. As an expert on Middle East Kenneth Pollack predicts:

International public opinion is also of major importance for Iran's politics. Public opinion in the Arab world is largely sympathetic to an Iranian nuclear option, viewing it as a counter to Israel and a way to overcome the perceived double standards of allowing Israel, but not others in the region, to get away with the bomb. Turkish public opinion also does not perceive Iran or the nuclear issue in particular as a threat (Pollack, 2012).

The reality is that the concern about Iranian nuclear weapons programme has had three components: the production of fissile material, the development of missiles and the building of warheads. Heretofore, production of fissile material has been treated as by far the greatest danger, and the pace of Iranian production of fissile material has accelerated since 2006. So has the development of missiles of increasing range. What appears to have been suspended is the engineering aimed at the production of warheads. Meantime, Tehran has developed an indigenous infrastructure, since the early 2000s, world attention has focused in November 2004 mass production of the Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM) Shehab-3 ("Shooting Star" in Farsi) with a range of 2,000 kilometres and now its number reaches approximate 12 missile. Moreover, in the summer of 2005, Iran successfully tested a new solid fuel missile motor for its arsenal of MRBM Ghadr-1 and developing new MRBM Sajjil-2. Recently, in September, Iran unveiled a new Long-Range Ballistic Missile which appeared at a military parade in Tehran. LRBM is called the Khorramshahr missile range of 2,500 kilometres and can carry multiple warheads would be easily capable of reaching Israel and Saudi Arabia. This technological breakthrough can make Iran's missiles more mobile and quicker to deploy. Iran is determined to become the world's tenth nuclear power. It has ignored several UN Security Council resolutions directing it to suspend enrichment and has refused to fully explain its nuclear activities to the UN nuclear watchdog, the Interna-

tional Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (Report of International Atomic Energy Agency on verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, 2015). Iran's nuclear weapon programme constitutes a significant aspect of stability and security in the Middle East. Over the past two decades, this issue has repeatedly appeared to border on a major crisis spread by prolonged negotiations. Regarding the West, some scholars, policymakers and civil society perceives Iran's nuclear weapon programme as a danger for the Region and International peace and stability. Iran's military capabilities remain a concern in the region and beyond. Although the embargo on the sale of many conventional weapons to Iran is to remain in force from 5 years ago and on the 18th of October 2015, the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) the deal designed to limit Iran's nuclear activities signed between Iran and the United Nations Security Council 5 Permanent Member States and European Union (P5+1). To extend that breakout time, the JCPOA requires that uranium enrichment at Fordow and Natanz be restricted and a heavy-water reactor, at Arak, have its core rendered inoperable; its plutonium by-product, the P5+1 countries feared, could have been reprocessed into weapons-grade material. These facilities are now being repurposed for peace purposes, and subjected to inspections by monitors from the IAEA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, 2015). The Agreement aims to guard against the possibility that Iran could develop nuclear weapon in secret at undeclared sites. In the meantime, United States current administration announced in October this year its decision to reject the agreement, threatening to leave the deal altogether if it was not amended to permanently block Tehran from building nuclear weapons or Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM). Iran responded that it will not reopen the agreement for negotiation. After Trump's statement that the Pentagon was identifying new areas where it could work with allies to put pressure on Iran in support of the President's new policy toward the region and was reviewing the deployment of United States forces. This policy in towards Iran is assertive and would lead to the crisis between this two states.

The risks of Iran's entry into the nuclear club are well known: encouraged by Teheran's ambition to become the regional hegemon, it might multiply its attempts at sabotaging its neighbours and encouraging terrorism against the United States and Israel, the risk of both conventional and nuclear war in the Middle East would escalate. More states in the region might also want to become nuclear powers, the balance of power in the Middle East would be challenged and broader efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons would be undermined. A nuclear-armed Iran, believing that it possessed a powerful deterrent from Israel might increase the support for proxy war carried out against Israel. After gaining nuclear weapons, Iran will stop worrying about the relative balance of power engaging in conventional arms races or competing for alliance

partners. It is Israel's nuclear arsenal, not Iran's desire for one, which has contributed most to the Iran's necessities for acquiring nuclear arms. Power, after all, pleads to be balanced. What is surprising about the Israeli case is that it has taken so long for a potential balancer to emerge. Proponents of the theory of the nuclear revolution have always recognized the discrepancy between their theory's predictions and the actual behaviour of countries in the nuclear era. One of the leading proponents of the theory of balance of power, Waltz argues: "that nuclear weapons eliminate the thorny problems of estimating the present and future strengths of competing states and of trying to anticipate their strategies" (Waltz, 2012). Iranian leadership's main concern was its own self-resilience and it believed that a nuclear deterrent alone could give it enough protection, then as a nuclear state, it might curtail its support for proxies in order to avoid needless disputes with other nuclear powers (Waltz, 2012). Most importantly, scholars and policymakers from the West should take in to consideration from a historical experience that when nuclear capabilities emerge, so, too, does stability as it partially occurred in case of India and Pakistan. According to this principle and theoretical assumption, Iran has no reason to cancel its nuclear weapon programme. After Iran acquires it, unquestionably the status quo will be changed in the Middle East. The JCPOA does not prevent Iran from fully accomplishing its nuclear weapons programme. Regardless of how secure nuclear-armed states are, the competition still remains very intense between leading regional powers. Consequently, after building this programme, nuclear antagonism between Iran and Israel could easily generate a regional crisis. On the other hand, if Iran will develop nuclear capabilities, what will prevent Saudi Arabia to start the nuclear weapons programme development from the same reason, to maintain the balance of power with Iran and the region?



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