Scrutinizing Iran's Strategy of "Latent Nuclear Deterrence"

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Abstract

Some elites within Iran's ruling system have long supported the idea that Iran needs to acquire nuclear weapons as ultimate deterrent against security threats but the dominant view in the high echelons of power has run against it.

That prompted Iranian strategists to devise a plan that will keep Iran in compliance with its obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and simultaneously provide it with a capability to develop nuclear weapons without building a physical bomb. That means turning Iran into a latent nuclear power.

The key goal of this paper is to respond to this question: What prompted Iran to pursue the strategy of "latent nuclear deterrence"?

Findings of this article on the basis of qualitative research method show that the anarchic structure of the international system and the threat perception of the elites convinced the Islamic Republic to pursue "latent nuclear deterrence" as a necessary strategy for its survival.

This research concludes that Iranian strategists found out that embracing the "Japan model" _ possessing capability to build nuclear weapons within a short period of time _ would be the best strategy to stop enemies from initiating a full-fledged military confrontation against Iran.

Keywords: Latent nuclear deterrence, international system, Iran nuclear program

Introduction

There are five assumptions, in the words of John Mearsheimer, about the international system:

"(1) The international system is anarchic, which doesn't mean that it is chaotic or riven by disorder … it is an ordering principle, which says that the system comprises independent states that have no central authority above them …; (2) Great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other. States are potentially dangerous to each other, although some states have more military might than others and are therefore more dangerous …; (3) States can never be certain about other states' intentions. Specifically, no state can be sure that another state will not use its offensive military capability to attack the first state. (4) Survival is the primary goal of great powers (and all other states) … Survival dominates other motives …; (5) Great powers (and all other states) are rational actors. They are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it (they generally act on the basis of cost-benefit analysis)." (Mearsheimer, 2001)

Anarchy is the central feature of the international system. Since the world lacks any supreme authority, states have to rely on themselves to survive. They resort to "self-help" because they cannot trust others for their security.

States compete for power. They have contradictory goals in foreign policy and work to achieve them through accumulation of power.

"International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim." (Morgenthau, 1949)

Without power, including but not limited to military power, they are subject to aggression and bullying, especially from great powers and their enemies. More powerful states resort to coercion and the use of force, if it benefits them under a cost-benefit analysis, to resolve their disputes with the weaker states.

The prime responsibility of states is to ensure their survival, protect their territorial integrity and safeguard their security. And leaders strive to defend their national interests by means of power in an anarchic world. No state can protect its interests without possessing a degree of power.

"The statesman must think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power." (Morgenthau, 1985)

But neoclassical realists such as Randall Schweller believe that the behavior of states is "not only determined by relative power, but also by 'state interests', which can be offensive (revisionist powers) or defensive (status quo powers)". He emphasizes both capability and interests to explain state behavior. For instance, Schweller argues that both system structure and factors such as Nazi ideology and the leadership of Adolf Hitler need to be probed in order to understand the outbreak and course of World War II. (Schweller, 1998)

And William Wohlforth, another neoclassical realist, emphasizes the intervening variable "perception of power" to explain state behavior. For instance, he highlights the motivations and power perceptions of the Soviet leaders to explain their behavior and says the Soviet Union's grand strategy during the Cold War was consistent with the perceptions and goals of its leaders. (Wohlforth, 1993)

There are 195 countries in the world today. (Worldometer, 2022)

With no law enforceable among them, states act on the basis of their own logic and reason. This situation results in conflict of interests, sometimes it leads to war.

"Wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them." (Waltz, 1959)

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a revisionist state. It opposes foreign domination and has been at odds with the United States since its 1979 Islamic Revolution. It has strived to challenge American policies and change the U.S.-favored international order. And it does not recognize Israel and considers it an illegitimate entity.

From day one, immediately after the 1979 Islamic Revolution that toppled the pro-Western monarchy and established an Islamic Republic, Iran has been subject to aggression, coercion, assassinations, economic sanctions, sabotage, cyberwar, soft-war and diplomatic pressures.

The Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980, with covert and later overt support of the United States, taught Iran a costly lesson: It needs to rely on itself, get strong and create sufficient deterrence to stop other potential adversaries from attacking it again.

In the 1980s, former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was the most immediate potent threat to Iran. Later, the threat of Saddam was replaced by the United States. The 1991 war, following the Iraqi invasion and brief occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq left Iranian strategists in no doubt that Iran could be next and thus it needs to upgrade its defensive capabilities and create adequate deterrence to dissuade the U.S. from attacking it.

All these gigantic developments had a deep impact on the mindset of Iranian strategists, who were eager to make sure that Iran will not fall victim of aggression again.

Iran's principal goal, like any other state, is to survive. It has pursued to possess both hard and soft power.

In the words of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, "the people of Iran should strengthen themselves … The issue is about national power. I would tell our dear people that if a people are not strong and if they are weak, they will be bullied. If a people are not strong, global blackmailers will blackmail and extort them. If these blackmailers can, they will trample upon them." (Khamenei, 2014)

"Iran's strategy is deterrence." (Rouhani, 2015) Its indigenous missile program, its space program, its drone program, its naval strategy, and its creation of proxy groups throughout the Middle East - as a prudent plan to expand Iran's "strategic depth" – all have been part of Iran's strategy of creating deterrence and forward defense.

The "forward defense" doctrine implies that Iran should fight its opponents outside its borders to prevent conflict inside Iran. (Yossef, 2019)

Another key element of Iran's deterrence strategy was a decision to possess the entire nuclear fuel cycle, from extracting uranium ore to enrichment and production of nuclear fuel. In the 1980s, some elites even pushed for nuclear deterrence.

"Iran must acquire the necessary deterrent weapons in order to be able to stand up to its enemies … The most advanced weapons must be produced inside our country even if our enemies don't like it. There is no reason that they have the right to produce a special type of weapons, while other countries are deprived of it." (Mesbah Yazdi, 2009)

Others, including Khamenei, opposed it.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran considers the use of nuclear, chemical and similar weapons as a great and unforgivable sin … the Islamic Republic has never been after nuclear weapons and that it will never give up the right of its people to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Our motto is: 'Nuclear energy for all and nuclear weapons for none.'" (Khamenei, 2012)

Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) banning it from developing nuclear weapons. The founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and later his successor Khamenei, also prohibited production and use of nuclear weapons.

Strategists devised a subtle nuclear strategy that will keep Iran in full compliance with its NPT obligations and at the same time will provide the country with a capability to build nuclear arms without producing a physical bomb. That led to Iran's strategy of "latent nuclear deterrence."

Based on this introduction, we put forward the key question of this research:

What prompted Iran to pursue the strategy of "latent nuclear deterrence"?

In response, this hypothesis is put to test:

The anarchic structure of the international system and the growing threat perception of the elites convinced Iran's strategists to pursue "latent nuclear deterrence" as a necessary strategy for the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This research has employed "qualitative method" and has adopted "neoclassical realism" theory as its theoretical framework of analysis.

This paper probes Iran's nuclear strategy and explains why Iranian leaders preferred "latent nuclear deterrence" to "nuclear arsenal" as a strategy to boost Iran's deterrence power.

Authors of this study argue that "latent nuclear deterrence" _ possessing capability to build nuclear weapons within a short period of time _would dissuade enemies from attacking Iran while would keep the country within international treaties. So, given Iran's obligations under the NPT, Iranian strategists found out that embracing a Japan-style push to nuclear threshold would be the best strategy to stop enemies from initiating a full-fledged military confrontation against Iran.

Theoretical Framework

Realism is the dominant school of thought in the study of international relations. It's subdivided into "classical realism" and "neorealism." They are united in believing that international politics is a field of conflict among actors, who pursue power and wealth, but they differ on the essential causes of conflicts among them.

"Classical realism" argues that the cause of war and conflict is rooted in human nature. Mankind is not fundamentally benevolent but self-centered. In the words of Thomas Hobbes "Man to Man is a kind of God" (among citizens within the state) and "Man is wolf to Man" (among states at the international level). (Valentina, 2020)

"Neorealism" attributes war to the anarchic structure of the international system. It primarily argues that the structure of the international system determines the behavior of states.

The international system is anarchic. It means there is no global government and that there is no higher authority than states in the international system, although there are international regimes setting regulations to lessen the consequences of anarchy.

Neorealism primarily focuses on the anarchic structure of the international system. Distribution of power is not equal among the international actors. Some states are very powerful and others are weak. Powerful actors are more likely to resolve their differences with weaker actors through the use of force if they see war to their benefit under a "cost-benefit" analysis.

Anarchy compels states to rely on themselves for their own survival. They have to resort to "self-help" since they cannot rely on others. There is nothing to prevent war except "balance

of power". States are responsible to protect their own security and territorial integrity. War can occur anytime, especially if you are weak and if you have powerful enemies.

"Neorealism" itself is divided into "defensive neorealism" and "offensive neorealism."

"Defensive neorealism" insists on security. "For defensive realists conquest is generally costly and the international system usually encourages moderation … Defensive realists maintain that the international system encourages states to pursue moderate and restrained behavior to ensure their survival and safety, and provides incentives for expansion in only a few select instances … (To them) aggression is rare because states balance against aggressors and the offense–defense balance usually favors the defense thereby making conquest more difficult … Defensive realists assert that the structure of the international system rarely encourages states to expand in order to increase their security, that conquest is rarely profitable, and that aggression provokes counterbalancing behavior which results in self-encirclement, overextension, and strategic exposure." (Lobell, 2017)

But "offensive neorealism" emphasizes on maximization of power. "Offensive realism seeks power and influence to achieve security through domination and hegemony … For offensive realists, systemic imperatives push states to expand. Expansion and conquest often make states more secure, can pay huge dividends, and block other states from acquiring additional power … Offensive realists argue that anarchy compels states to maximize influence, to compete for power in a never-ending struggle for hegemony, and to engage in territorial expansion. … (To them) conquest is profitable. Mearsheimer claims that states that initiate aggression win the wars 60 percent of the time ("between 1815 and 1980 there were 63 wars and the aggressor won 39 times"). (Lobell, 2017)

"Neoclassical realism", a combination of "classical realism" and "neorealism", believes the cause of war and conflict results from both.

Coined by Gideon Rose in his 1998 *World Politics* article, "neoclassical realism" concentrates on the interaction of the international system and the internal dynamics of states and how these two influence foreign policy. It believes that foreign policy of states is the outcome of both the structure of the international system and domestic influences.

Rose argues that "foreign policy is driven by both internal and external factors" and says Innenpolitik stresses the "influence of domestic factors on foreign policy".

Neoclassical realism "incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought."

Rose argues that "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. However … the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical." (Rose, 1998)

At the end of the day, it is the elites and political leaders who make decisions in foreign policy. And they make decisions on the basis of their perceptions of power and threats. They also look at the strength of themselves and their enemies, the distribution of power in the international system, and their domestic considerations.

Latent nuclear deterrence

Nuclear latency is the case of a country that possesses technological and technical capability to develop a nuclear weapon quickly at will. It has the means to build an atomic bomb but it has not pieced them together.

This is how Joseph Pilat of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars defines nuclear latency: "Nuclear latency entails the possession of some or all of the technologies, facilities, materials, expertise (including tacit knowledge), resources, and other capabilities needed to develop nuclear weapons, short of full operational weaponization."

Nuclear weapons are considered ultimate deterrence. They reduce the risk of a major conflict because states possessing atomic arsenals can retaliate if attacked. The cost of a nuclear war is immense and intolerable. Thus, possessing nuclear weapons make conflict less likely.

Matthew Fuhrmann and Benjamin Tkach argue that while a latent nuclear power may not be able to launch an immediate nuclear strike, if attacked, it could assemble a nuclear weapon within a short period of time.

"Nuclear latency may provide deterrence benefits even if there is little chance of nuclear use in the short term … Potential attackers presumably understand that latent nuclear powers could build nuclear bombs relatively quickly if their security environment deteriorates. Given

that states general want to avoid fomenting the spread of nuclear weapons, they may think twice before initiating military disputes against states with nuclear latency. Thus, latent nuclear powers may be able to deter conflict by (implicitly) threatening to 'to nuclear' following an attack ... nuclear latency is associated with a reduced risk of being targeted in military disputes. Thus having the capacity to build nuclear weapons, like possessing an atomic arsenal, may bolster deterrence." (Fuhrmann and Tkach, 2015)

A country possessing high nuclear latency can threaten to build nuclear weapons if attacked. Thus, it reduces the likelihood that a potential aggressor will embark on a major military assault against it.

"This strategy shows how a signatory to the NPT can legitimately maintain a nuclear fuel cycle capability and possess expertise, technical capacity and huge quantities of fissile material without diverting it towards a nuclear weapon. If seen necessary for national survival, that country can build nuclear weapons within a year _ or less than a year ... _ because it already possesses all the means necessary to do so." (Dareini, 2017)

This is what Mohamed ElBaradei, former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has called "latent weapons states", saying "It's a description that fits a lot of countries that have the know-how. The only key is the fissile material. If you are really smart, you don't need to develop a weapon, you just develop a capability. And that is the best deterrence." (Sanger, 2004)

Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Canada, Germany and Brazil are examples of non-weapon states which maintain this posture.

"Latent Nuclear Deterrence" for Iran

Is it a violation of the NPT if a member state possesses the entire nuclear fuel cycle or enriches uranium at any grade? No.

Creating industrial-scale uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing facilities is not a violation of the NPT. The treaty sets no limits on the level of uranium enrichment purity. There is nothing wrong with any country producing even highly enriched uranium. NPT only prohibits member states from producing an actual nuclear weapon. It bars them from weaponizing their nuclear program. The treaty requires member states "not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices" and at the same time

awards them the "inalienable right" to "develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination." (IAEA, 1970)

The NPT, according to Yousaf M. Butt, a nuclear physicist with the Federation of American Scientists, "allows nations to get to the red line of weaponization … Iran is raising eyebrows. But what it is doing is a concern, not illegal." So, "the problem is the treaty's conspicuous loopholes, not the plucky Iranians." (Broad, 2012)

Iranian strategists have discovered that creating nuclear deterrence without building a physical bomb would serve Iran's national interests while developing an atomic weapon may not. Why? Developing nuclear weapons would find Iran guilty of its NPT obligations and would disgrace a fatwa, or religious edict, issued by Ayatollah Khamenei banning nuclear weapons. It would also discredit Iran internationally and would probably allow the United States to build global consensus, including at the U.N. level, to portray Iran as a pariah state and impose maximum sanctions against Tehran. Additionally, it would even provide justifications for the U.S. to lead a possible military assault on Iran.

But being a "latent nuclear power" robs the U.S. or others of such justifications.

So, Iranian strategists decided that Iran would gain if it took its nuclear program to an advanced stage short of weaponization.

Ali Larijani, Iran's former Parliament Speaker, told Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada and Japan's House of Councilors President Satsuki Eda in two separate meetings in Tokyo on 24 February 2010 that Iran's nuclear program was following the Japanese model.

Larijani reconfirmed this to one of the writers of this article recently, saying "Japan has nuclear technology but doesn't possess atomic weapons. We follow the Japan model. There is no reason of us being denied the same benefits available to Japan."

Iran has been encircled by U.S. military bases all around it. The U.S. Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain. U.S. aircraft carriers sail through the Persian Gulf, close to Iranian territorial waters, and the Indian Ocean. American officials at times have even hinted at "regime change" in Iran. They have imposed draconian economic sanctions to force Iran to change its behavior. They assassinated Iran's top general, Qasem Soleimani, in a third country. They have resorted to sabotage, covert operations and cyberattacks to undermine Iran's nuclear, military and industrial programs. They have shown every act of hostility short of a full-fledged military aggression.

Continuing threats from U.S. officials that "all options are on the table" plus constant Israeli threats and perceptions of Iranian elites that Iran's very existence would be in danger without sufficient deterrence capabilities convinced the leaders in Tehran that they needed to turn Iran into a latent nuclear power.

"Latent nuclear deterrence" works because states that possess advanced uranium enrichment technology can threaten to build nuclear weapons, if attacked.

The U.S. doesn't want Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. So, under a "cost - benefit analysis", it is not expected to attack Iran because doing so will give Tehran a legitimate argument to rush towards building a nuclear weapon in a short period of time. That outcome would be exactly the opposite of what the U.S. seeks.

That's probably why states possessing advanced uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing facilities have not rushed to build nuclear weapons and, instead, have opted to be latent nuclear powers.

There are 31 countries that have developed the capacity to build nuclear bombs from 1939 to 2012, and only 10 of those states went on to acquire atomic arsenals. (Fuhrmann and Tkach, 2015)

American officials have publicly been admitting for more than a decade now that Iran has the technical ability to build a nuclear weapon.

Addressing the Senate Intelligence Committee on 12 March 2013, the then U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, said: "Technical advancements strengthen our assessment that Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons. This makes the central issue its political will to do so." (Clapper, 2013)

CIA Director William Burns admitted on July 20, addressing the Aspen Security Forum in Colorado, that his agency "doesn't see any evidence that Iran's Supreme Leader has made a decision to move to weaponize nuclear program." (Majeed, 2022)

Thanks to its proxies in the Middle East, from Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthis in Yemen to Palestinian groups in the Gaza Strip and proxy groups in Iraq, Iran has been able to deter its enemies. "Would a nuclear bomb add much to Tehran's deterrent? … A nuclear weapon wouldn't actually help Tehran project power in the region. Developing them, let alone using them, would result in immediate military action from much stronger powers, undermining the

very purpose of the bomb, which is ensuring Iran's security and territorial integrity." (Depetris, 2022)

ElBaradei writes in his book, "The Age of Deception: Nuclear Diplomacy in Treacherous Times," that Iran's enrichment program was meant to bring Tehran regional power without building a bomb.

"My best reading is that the Iranian nuclear program, including enrichment, has been for Iran the means to an end. Tehran is determined to be recognized as a regional power. The recognition, in their view, is intimately linked to the achievement of a grand bargain with the West. Even if the intent is not to develop nuclear weapons, the successful acquisition of the full nuclear fuel cycle, including enrichment, sends a signal of power to Iran's neighbors and to the world, providing a sort of insurance against attack. Each of the factions in Iran understands that the nuclear program is in itself a deterrent. There is a clear consensus domestically that Iran needs to maintain that deterrence. Overall, though, Iran's goal is not to become another North Korea _ a nuclear weapon possessor but a pariah in the international community _ but rather Brazil or Japan, a technological powerhouse with the capacity to develop nuclear weapons if the political winds were to shift, while remaining a non-nuclear-weapon state under the NPT." (ElBaradei, 2011)

In short, Iranian strategists have come to believe that weaponizing their nuclear program may even be a bad idea since it may not add much to Iran's deterrence power while "latent nuclear deterrence" is already working.

Iran's New Nuclear Discourse

There are telling signs that a new nuclear discourse is in the making in Iran's political jargon: Capability to build nuclear weapons without a physical bomb.

That, based on our content analysis of remarks by senior Iranian leaders, explains new hard realities on the ground amid stalled talks aimed at reviving the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Iran's increased expertise in running an industrial-scale uranium enrichment program, its production of enriched uranium at the level of 60 percent, which is just a step away from weapons-grade material, and operation of an advanced generation of centrifuges have all allowed Iran to gain "irreversible knowledge". (Batmanghelidj, Esfandyar, 2022)

This expensive experience and continuing technical advancements have pushed Iran closer to becoming a threshold nuclear state.

Iran is the only non-nuclear-weapon state in the world that has enriched uranium to 60 percent purity and has shortened its breakout capacity to just a few months, if not weeks.

Irrespective of whether the JCPOA will be saved or not, Iran has opted for a new nuclear discourse.

For many years, Iran's political establishment insisted only on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy without acknowledging the deterrence value of its advanced uranium enrichment technology. That has begun to change.

Iranian strategists are now convinced that the new discourse will better serve the country's national interests.

First, it will build up the pressure on the Biden administration to give up its goal of a "stronger and longer" JCPOA and will pressure Israel not to push the Middle East into a regional war.

Second, it demonstrates Iran's technological capabilities as a source of national pride, a symbol of Iran's modern identity and a strong leverage in any negotiations with the outside world.

Iran's nuclear strategy is meant to create a breakout capability to serve as a credible deterrent without building an atomic bomb and enhance its national security without violating Tehran's commitments under the NPT or undermining the religious edict issued by Khamenei.

Iran's new nuclear discourse effectively began in 2021, long after the U.S. unilaterally pulled out of the JCPOA, when Iran's former intelligence minister Mahmoud Alavi raised the possibility that Iran would be forced to seek nuclear arms if American sanctions were not lifted: "If you corner a cat it might behave differently than a cat roaming free. If they push Iran in that direction, it would not be Iran's fault but the fault of those who pushed Iran." (Gladstone, Fassihi and Bergman, 2021)

Then, it was remarks by Kamal Kharrazi, Iran's former foreign minister and now a senior adviser to Khamenei, on 17 July 2022 that "Iran has the technical means to produce a nuclear bomb but there has been no decision by Iran to build one." (Hafezi, 2022)

And comments by Iran's nuclear chief, Mohammad Eslami, on 1 August 2022 that "Iran has the technical ability to build an atomic bomb, but such a program is not on the agenda" (Reuters, 2022) are the latest taboo-breaking language employed by senior officials.

It demonstrates that policy-makers are now publicly declaring Iran a "latent nuclear power" to increase Tehran's deterrence posture in the face of stalled nuclear talks, changes in regional security environment following the Abraham Accords, and increasing Israeli threats.

Iranian leaders had calculated that it would be better for the Islamic Republic to be fully integrated into the international community and the global economy than to be a nuclear-armed but living under draconian sanctions.

That calculation played a key role in convincing Iran to embrace the JCPOA despite offering a lot of concessions.

Iran fulfilled all its obligations under the deal, as certified by the IAEA multiple times: "Iran is implementing its nuclear-related commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action … The Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of nuclear material declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement." (Amano, 2019)

Iran even agreed to the world's most stringent restrictions on its nuclear program implemented by the IAEA:

"Our inspection work has doubled since 2013. IAEA inspectors now spend 3,000 calendar days per year on the ground in Iran. We have installed some 2,000 tamper-proof seals on nuclear material and equipment. We collect and analyze hundreds of thousands of images captured daily by our sophisticated surveillance cameras in Iran — about half of the total number of such images that we collect throughout the world … The JCPOA represents a significant gain for verification … If the JCPOA were to fail, it would be a great loss for nuclear verification and for multilateralism." (Dixit, 2018)

Iran didn't enjoy the economic benefits it had been promised under the JCPOA. Later, the U.S., under Donald Trump, denounced the deal as "rotten", "horrible" and "disastrous". Finally, it unilaterally pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018.

Tehran still continued to fulfil its obligations for a year after America's withdrawal from the JCPOA, counting on European promises that they will make sure Iran will benefit economically. That didn't happen, prompting Iran to gradually reduce its commitments and advance its nuclear program.

With the Biden administration failing to return to the JCPOA, Iranian leaders concluded that it would remain under sanctions no matter what it does regarding its nuclear program. So, it needed to revisit its calculations. It opted to expand its uranium enrichment program in order to pressure the West to lift the sanctions and get closer to a nuclear breakout capacity.

Assassinations, economic sanctions, sabotage, cyberwar, soft-war and diplomatic pressures didn't stop Iran's nuclear program. And Iran's growing nuclear capabilities and the possibility of the JCPOA's death has led to increasing Israeli animosity.

"Israel's strategy is now focused on mobilizing regional resources to simultaneously contain Iran's military and nuclear programs … Israeli officials may view these regional defense collaborations (Abraham Accords) as one of the phases of their preparation to strike Iran. In addition, bringing Israel's military presence closer to Iran would significantly enhance its intelligence gathering and strike capabilities inside the country … Iran is also developing its own response, driven by the logic of balancing the threat … Tehran may view its nuclear program as a way to balance. An expansion of Arab-Israeli military ties may convince the leadership in Tehran that keeping its nuclear program at the current level might have future security benefits. If Tehran assesses that with or without the deal, regional military cooperation to counter Iran's capabilities is going to increase, then it is likely to conclude that the revival of the JCPOA represents a greater security risk. In this case, Tehran may decide to maintain the option of nuclear escalation as a response … (Also), Tehran may choose to project power and enhance its deterrence posture by strengthening regional proxies and stepping up its security assistance to them." (Bahgat and Divsallar, 2022)

These developments explain Iran's new nuclear discourse.

So, Iran's acceleration of its enrichment program may not merely be used as leverage to pressure the West to lift the sanctions but rather become a latent nuclear power due to increasing threats.

"Iran may be more interested at this point in time in becoming a latent nuclear state like Japan than a nuclear power like India, Pakistan or Israel. Not only is this consistent with its official line, which states that Iran will not develop nuclear weapons that it considers 'immoral', it is also more realistic than becoming a nuclear power and more achievable than ever before." (Bishara, 2021)

Iran's accumulation of highly enriched uranium and its expansion of its nuclear program is the direct consequence of U.S. exit from the JCPOA and its refusal to lift the sanctions.

Given the growing threats against Iran, Iranian strategists favor the Japanese model, arguing that if Japan is authorized to enjoy high latency status and yet remain in the NPT, then Iran has the same right to possess advanced nuclear fuel cycle technologies and enjoy the same status.

"While Iran may want to have the option of weaponizing its nuclear capabilities after the JCPOA or a replacement agreement expires, it may well decide not to do so when the time comes. History shows that many countries with advanced nuclear technologies but without nuclear bombs - the so-called nuclear latent states - opt to stay that way, rather than rushing to build nuclear weapons as soon as they can. There are reasons to believe that Iran, too, may choose to remain non-nuclear at least in the foreseeable future." (Fukushima, 2021)

Conclusion

Security and foreign policies of almost all states are generally shaped by what rival or enemy states do to them.

In an anarchic world, Iran has no option but to get strong in order to survive. It faces many enemies, specifically a great power like the United States and others like Israel, and has to protect its security on its own.

Given Iran's geographical location, its strategic significance and the threat perception of its leaders, Iran's strategists have determined that the country's military strategy primarily needs to be based on deterrence and forward defense.

Pressure from the international system has led to the perception among Iran's elites that deterrence and forward defense is not a choice but a strategic necessity for Iran's survival.

While Iran has strengthened its conventional deterrence force _ missile program, drone program and creating proxy groups throughout the Middle East _ it has worked to turn itself into a "latent nuclear power". That is creating nuclear deterrence without building a physical atomic bomb.

Possessing a nuclear arsenal is widely seen as the ultimate deterrent in international relations. But Iranian strategists have found out that creating a capability to build nuclear weapons without producing an actual bomb would serve Iran's interests best. They were convinced that

this would create deterrence and at the same time would not be a violation of Iran's obligations under the NPT.

Possessing a technological and technical capability to build a nuclear weapon, to a large extent, deters aggression while building a bomb may invite enemies to attack before you are done. Developing atomic bomb may also provide your enemies _ especially if they are great powers _ with both pretext and international credibility to create an alliance to confront you.

Developing nuclear weapons would have turned Iran into a pariah state. Iran has neither pursued to become another North Korea nor has it wished to become another Libya or Iraq. Instead, it has opted for "Japan model," that is being able to build nuclear weapons in a short period of time, instead of possessing a nuclear arsenal. In case the country comes under physical military attack or its existence is endangered, then it can rush to develop nuclear weapons in a matter of weeks as an act of self-defense.

Iran's new nuclear policy of highlighting its capability to build nuclear weapons appears to be aimed at increasing the costs for enemies from any possible military attack and also obtaining concessions from them. Iranian policy-makers cherish the value of being a "latent nuclear power". Their new language is seen an effort to increase Iran's deterrence power in the face of changes in the regional security environment following the Abraham Accords and increasing Israeli as well as American threats.

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