

Oct. 1, 2004

"After Iraq, Iran?"

Iran and its possible nuclear weapons has become again a matter of active discussion in the media and debate in the U.S. government and world diplomatic channels. The immediate background is clear. When George W. Bush constructed his "axis of evil," he listed Iran along with Iraq and North Korea as one of the three countries of which he was speaking. The U.S. subsequently invaded Iraq. And the U.S. launched five-power discussions with North Korea about its putative nuclear program, discussions that have gotten nowhere.

Iran was treated differently. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) sought to inspect Iran's nuclear facilities, and issued a report indicating some concern with what was going on. Iran insisted that it was seeking enriched uranium facilities only in order to produce peaceful energy output. The European powers and Russia insisted that Iran give stronger guarantees that it was not intending to become a nuclear power. The U.S. wished immediate Security Council action threatening sanctions on the matter. The Europeans demurred, pending further diplomacy. Iran however then canceled permission for further inspections by the IAEA, indicating dissatisfaction with the allegations made against Iran. The whole matter seems now at a standstill. Israel has been indicating that it would not tolerate Iran's joining the nuclear club and has implied that it might therefore take military action. And in Washington, there seems to be a debate within the Bush administration as to whether or not the U.S. should contemplate military action, either directly or via Israel.

What's going on? Let us look at it from the viewpoint of each of the powers concerned. The United States and Israel do not believe Iran when Iran says it is not intending to develop nuclear weapons. The West Europeans and Russia are not so sure. They think that international pressure could get Iran to renounce any such aspirations. The Iranians seem to think at least two things. There is nothing under present international law that makes it illegitimate for them to develop enriched uranium capacities for peaceful purposes. But probably they also think that there is no good reason why they should not develop nuclear weapons.

The Iranian logic is rather simple. There are now at least eight nuclear powers in the world. At least six of them are militarily nearby - Israel, India, Pakistan, Russia, China, and of course the United States. They feel that there is no moral reason why Iran is less entitled to nuclear weapons than these countries. And, as long as Iran does not have such weapons, they believe that its political and military position in the region is limited. The U.S. and Israel agree that this is the logic of Iran's position. They therefore do not credit the diplomatic protestations of Iran that it does not intend to develop nuclear weapons, which they consider to be merely a smokescreen to appease world public opinion while affording Iran the time to complete the operation.

I agree that this is the logic of the Iranian position. The question, however, is therefore what? What Iran sees as a military necessity serving as a defense against potential U.S. military action, the U.S. and Israel see as a military threat to them. The Europeans and Russia are caught in the middle, and are not sure what to do. These countries are essentially waffling. So let us analyze the real consequences of Iran joining the nuclear club, say in two years or so. Is Iran likely to engage in military action against someone - Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan - when it

obtains these weapons? This seems extremely doubtful. To be sure, acquiring such weapons would make Iran's political position stronger vis-a-vis the region. Of this, there seems little doubt. Is this a reason for war?

What are the U.S. and Israel really afraid of? In the case of Israel, any military strengthening of any Arab or nearby Muslim country is seen as a negative development to be opposed. Iran is not only openly and vigorously hostile to Israel but is a mainstay of the Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon. What an Iranian nuclear capacity would really do to Israel is put a damper on its ability to take strong military measures against its neighbors. From Israel's point of view, this is enough to make it feel that an absolute priority for them is to prevent Iran from developing nuclear capacity. And Israel is obviously considering the possibility of launching a preventive air raid to destroy Iran's nuclear capacity, as it did to Iraq some twenty years ago.

The U.S. point of view is slightly different. The U.S. may think that the Israeli fears are a bit exaggerated. The U.S. may even agree that Iran is unlikely to launch a nuclear attack on anyone, or give atomic weapons to al-Qaeda. What the U.S. really fears is that, if Iran is allowed to join the nuclear club, this will break the dike, and legitimate an outpouring of attempts of others to become nuclear powers - South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan; Brazil and Argentina; South Africa; Ukraine, and no doubt others. Plus Iraq! For, if Iran has nuclear weapons, will not an Iraqi regime, even one led by Iyad Allawi (if he survives), not want one too?

The U.S. may have the most military hardware by far in the world today, and no one else is going to come close for a good twenty years at least. But the generalized spread of even second-rate nuclear weapons would be an enormous constraint on the use of military force by the U.S. The U.S. already has serious problems with having a large enough military force (as opposed to military hardware) to enforce its will on the ground. Its military efforts might grind to a virtual halt, if 25 countries had a couple of nuclear weapons. This is make or break for the vaunted military supremacy of the United States.

So, what will happen? Even half the Bush regime is hesitant to think of actual military action in Iran. The Pentagon doesn't have the personnel. The U.S. doesn't have the money. And, if Iraq is difficult to occupy, Iran would be ten times more difficult. So, in fact, the U.S. has a position that is as hesitant as that of Europe. The Bush administration just doesn't want to admit it. And, were Kerry to become president, little would change in this regard.

The Iranians can make the same analyses. So, they will persist. Israel may get desperate. But it is not clear that Israel has the military force really to destroy Iranian nuclear capacity today. And world public opinion is not the same as it was twenty years ago. An Israeli military strike could ignite world opinion against it to new heights.

The bottom line? In two years, Iran will probably be a nuclear power, and the world will probably adjust to it, as it did to Indian and Pakistani acquisition of nuclear weapons. But one cannot be sure that the fanatics in the U.S. government (civilians, not military) can live with that. Nor can we be sure that the Israeli government can be restrained. In either case, the scenario will then be quite different.

by Immanuel Wallerstein