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North Korea, Iran and the United States: the Dangerous Games Nations Play

By William R. Polk

The Guardian of June 9, 2005 reported the disappearance from the International Atomic Energy Agency of a set or sets of detailed engineering plans for making nuclear materials and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). While there never have been any significant scientific secrets on the nuclear bomb, there has been somewhat restricted engineering information that would enable others to speed up, make more cheaply and avoid obvious tell-tale aspects of acquisition. Now we must assume that production information is widely available.

It seems to me that this is a more important stage in the increasing insecurity of the world than may have been realized. Perhaps one sign of this lack of recognition is that, to the best of my knowledge, the story of the disappearance of the engineering data did not appear in The New York Times, The Washington Post or other major American newspapers. Yet, the presumed availability of this information moves us, potentially at least, into a dangerous new phase of the spread of WMD: what was once only theoretical, the so-called "Nth nation" threat – "the proliferation of nuclear weapons to an indeterminate but increasingly significant number of states that now do not have them" -- is or soon might be a reality. Worse, the "classical" definition of the "Nth Nation" must now be redefined as the "Nth Group" since we have to assume that whether or not they now can acquire nuclear weapons, circumstances are likely to arise soon in which groups that are not nation-states will be able to do so.

It follows, I think it is obvious, that whatever the United States government is now doing to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons is not working. Indeed, United States decision to revert to building a bigger, more flexible (read "usable") and more integrated nuclear force -- that is a nuclear force that is not just a last resort but one that is considered an integral part of America's "normal" or on-going security policy -- and the decision to pull back from treaties aimed at stopping testing and cutting back inventories of weapons are pushing the world away from "security" toward Armageddon.

In 1968, the United States negotiated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in which it pledged to work toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, yet today, almost 40 years later, the United States maintains approximately 8,000 nuclear weapons, some 2,000 of which are on a "hair trigger alert;" that is, President Bush could launch them within 15 minutes. And it has announced plans to add to these existing weapons. In 2004, the United States Government voted against reaffirming the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty which it apparently felt restricted its announced intention to develop a range of new weapons including what Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld outlined in a Senate hearing as a "robust nuclear earth penetrator." (International Herald Tribune April 28, 2005) . Numerous other pronouncements cover "up-grading" the main nuclear force, putting weapons in outer space, etc. Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara has characterized this policy as "immoral, illegal, militarily unnecessary, and dreadfully dangerous." ("Apocalypse Soon," Foreign Policy, May/June 2005).

Subsidiary to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is the 1970 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that was extended indefinitely in 1995. The purpose of this treaty was to block an important step in the process of building bombs. To give itself the scope to test its own weapons, the Bush administration has decided not to be bound by this treaty. And, while the Administration announced a partial reduction of its 5,300 "operationally deployed nuclear warheads," it merely moved these to a reserve category rather than destroying them. Thus, it has set an example which presumably other nations will follow.

The good news in this somber picture is that, as former Assistant Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter pointed out (Foreign Affairs, September/October 2004), the United States helped to dissuade Germany, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Turkey from going "nuclear." However, this abstinence may be only temporary. Since Mr. Carter wrote his account it was revealed that at least Japan, South Korea and Taiwan had carried experiments to the point that they could quickly "weaponize" their stocks of nuclear materials.

The United States cannot be blamed for the spread of nuclear weapons to China, India and Pakistan, each of which had "regional" reasons to acquire weapons, nor can it claim credit for the decision of Argentina, Brazil and South Africa to renounce nuclear weapons. They did so, apparently, because they had no regional rivals against whom they needed protection. Former Secretary Carter asserts that "A peaceful and just world order led by the United States is the reason why only a few of the world's nearly 200 nations are proliferation 'rogues.'" This may have been true in the past, but more recently America's failure to carry out the obligation it assumed in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to work toward a world-wide reduction of weapons, its decision to push ahead with its own weapons program in violation of the treaty, its preparations to resume testing, its invasion of Iraq (allegedly to stop nuclear weapons development) and its threats to other countries, have undoubtedly accentuated rather than diminished the clear and present danger in which today we live.

Since we have lived under the nuclear threat for over half a century, many of us have probably put out of our minds just what a nuclear bomb can do. Having myself participated in the U.S. government "Crisis Management Committee" during Cuban Missile Crisis, taken part in the war games and other studies subsequent to it and discussed with my Russian counterparts the details of nuclear war, that memory is still painfully vivid to me. But in case it is not for others, let me briefly open one small window on it. The 2000 Report of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which Mr. McNamara quotes, gives the result of the explosion of just one small (one-megaton) weapon:

• a crater as deep as a football field is long and as large as about 40 or 50 football fields;

• a fireball that immediately kills all life within a considerably larger area and severely or lethally burns everyone within about 3 miles;

• all or most buildings flattened within about 12 miles. Those effects are virtually instantaneous;

• hundreds of thousands or millions more people will quickly be incinerated in resulting firestorms; and finally,

• such survivors as there may be, would be burned, without any means of medical attention; starving, without any succor; terrified, without any hope, and will soon be struck down by radiation. Such a small modern bomb (I have seen many much larger) is roughly 70 times the power of the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One would utterly destroy most cities. Used in numbers they would destroy whole civilizations.

In addition to the huge inventories of the U.S. and Russia (totaling 8,000 to 10,000 warheads), Britain, France, Israel and China each have at least 200 and perhaps twice or three times that number; India and Pakistan may each have 100 and North Korea is believed to have 6 comparable bombs.

After a certain point, numbers cease to have much strategic meaning. As I have shown above, the horror that would be produced by the explosion of even

one small bomb makes military action virtually unthinkable against any nuclear state. Unthinkable, that is, except as a deterrent or when a truly "rogue" government is prepared to commit suicide and lose hundreds of thousands or millions of its citizens.

So, in strategic terms, acquisition of even half a dozen weapons gives the holder virtual immunity from attack. Thus, regimes that fear attack can be expected either to attempt to acquire nuclear weapons or at least to give themselves the option to do so in case of need. That is the pressing issue we face today.

Acquiring weapons is not, of course, the same as using them although America sometimes does not draw that distinction in evaluating the presumed intentions of other states. So what does the Bush Administration tell us of its intentions? The latest exposé of its military policy is the March 2005 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America. [1] It proclaims that "America is a nation at war" (I-A) and warns that "At the direction of the President, we will defeat adversaries at the time, place, and in the manner of our choosing ..."

The Strategy paper posits an array of "challenges" that the American government holds to be the modern equivalents to "traditional military action." [2] (That is, "aggression" as defined in international law) These include "Catastrophic challenges [which] involve the acquisition, possession, and use of WMD or methods producing WMD like effects [and] Disruptive challenges [which] may come from adversaries who develop and use breakthrough technologies to negate current U.S. advantages in key operational domains."

Three things in this statement immediately stand out: first, America regards these "challenges," including seeking a deterrent to attack as tantamount to attack; second, the paper indicates America's determination to project its current "advantages" to "key operational domains" which in light of other pronouncements and actions effectively encompass the whole world; and, third, the Administration publicized – even on the internet -- what in my time in government would have been regarded as a top-secret national policy paper.

Putting these three points together, it is clear that the pronouncement is not so much a policy directive as a warning to actual or potential rivals or enemies. Translated, it means that states that move toward parity with the United States even in their own neighborhoods (as the paper puts it, "evolve into capable regional rivals or enemies") are in danger of being attacked. Lest there be any doubt, the paper proclaims that "Proliferation of WMD technology and expertise makes contending with catastrophic challenges an urgent priority [and we will acquire means]...when necessary to defeat them before they can be employed...when deterrence fails or efforts short of military action do not forestall gathering threats, the United States will employ military power...In all cases, we will seek to seize the initiative and dictate the tempo, timing, and direction of military operations…These include preventive actions…"

States that have been told they are in the target zone have included Iraq, Iran, North Korea and Syria. Iraq has been, at least for the time being, eliminated as an extra-territorial challenge although, of course, it remains a major adversary to American policy domestically and Syria is at least temporarily in less imminent threat. Since the President's 2002 "Axis of Evil" speech, the list of enemy nations has been expanded to include Cuba, Belarus, Myanmar (Burma) and Zimbabwe. Current attention is focused on North Korea and Iran. What is being planned or prepared to deal with them are among the most critical issues facing our country, but I do not find that they have been given the careful attention they deserve. Here I will briefly look at what has been happening in and to North Korea and Iran and attempt to evaluate how developments fit what I think is the evolving pattern. Finally, I will draw the policy implications and suggest what Americans might do to enhance their security in light of them. I begin with North Korea.

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In my government and business experience, I learned that it is often useful to imagine oneself on "the other side of the table" and to try to think (or as war gamers put it, "program") what motivates the other fellow, what he is likely to do and what effect his doing it would have on those on our side of the table. So I will try to think as though I were a North Korean policy planner or intelligence analyst for the next few minutes. What has shaped North Koreans may not be familiar to everyone so I begin by identifying what I assume are the things have created their "mindset."

North Korea was first invaded by Japan in 1592. Using the first "weapon of mass destruction," the newly invented gun, the Japanese overwhelmed the Koreans who then had only bows and arrows. Though that invasion ultimately failed, Korea was annexed to Japan in 1910 and spent much of the next half-century under a brutal and degrading occupation. In the north in the late 1930s, an anti-Japanese movement under a former student at an American Christian mission, Kim Il Sung, waged guerrilla war on the Japanese. Then in 1945, American and Russian troops drove out the Japanese and divided their occupation zones at the 38th parallel. America sponsored the creation of a government in the south and in 1948 declared the Republic of Korea at Seoul. That government was recognized by the United Nations as the legitimate power in the whole peninsula. In the North, furious at what he regarded as an American plot to divide Korea and ideologically driven, Kim proclaimed a rival republic. In 1950, believing that the United States (which had withdrawn its forces from the south) had no strategic interest in Korea and charging that the leaders of the South were "Quislings" who had collaborated with the Japanese, Kim attacked the south. In three months, his forces had occupied almost all the southern part of the peninsula. Then the quickly reintroduced American troops counterattacked and in October, General MacArthur reached the Yalu river at which point the Chinese intervened. Russian "volunteers" also flew for the North Koreans. Fighting swayed back and forth across Korea. By the time an armistice was worked out in July 1953, 3 million Koreans had died and the whole peninsula had been badly mauled.

Since then, North Korea has evolved into a brutal, totalitarian state. Today, it has no foreign friends or allies and feels itself surrounded and targeted especially by the United States. Excluded from most beneficial contacts and trade, it has developed, at almost unbearable human cost – with its people squeezed down to only two meals a day and otherwise deprived to save resources -- a powerful military-industrial complex that has now produced nuclear weapons and, apparently, sophisticated means to deliver them. That is to say that after years of suffering and privation, it has crossed the threshold that separates the period of "acquisition" from the period of "possession" of sufficient nuclear weapons capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on potential attackers and/or their nearby allies. It could devastate South Korea, wipe out Tokyo and/or ravage Taiwan. The U.S Defense Intelligence Agency conceded that North Korea "probably now has nuclear-armed missiles capable of hitting US soil." (The Guardian, May 4, 2005) In the face of this growing threat, as The New York Times editorialized on May 17, "Washington appears to have no clear strategy…" That is true because once a state actually acquires even a miniature nuclear arsenal, it acquires military immunity since it is far too "expensive" to attack even if small and poor. Nuclear weapons, moreover, are not North Korea's only military asset: in addition to an army estimated at 1 million soldiers, it has massed an estimated 10,000 cannon within range of the capital of South Korea and, if attacked, would almost certainly obliterate Seoul. (In that area, the 37,000 U.S. troops are more hostage than protector.) At huge cost, it has built a vast complex of factories and virtual cities underground – in which allegedly at least 20,000 laborers are employed – and so is essentially immune to aerial strikes. It is thus both a pariah in the international community and one that is capable of defending itself.

It is clear, I think, even from a brief review of its history, that North Korea is a wounded society. Remembering generations of humiliating foreign rule, it is intensely xenophobic. Poor, nearly starving and deprived in almost every sphere, its citizens must want a better, easier, less frightening way of life. That, I take it, is the national interest of Korea. Outside observers often stop with national interest in evaluating how a nation state will act or what incentives or pressures it will respond to. This is a mistake. Quite apart from national interest, indeed sometimes diametrically opposed to it, is interest of government. The North Korean government, at whatever cost to the country, is determined to stay in power. Kim Il Sung's son and successor, Kim Jong Il must know that "regime change" is a euphemism for his overthrow and murder. What America has been saying and doing can only have underlined his sense of personal threat and, like Saddam Husain in Iraq, so strongly has he reacted that he virtually disbanded his own political party, the Korean Workers Party, and placed all of his hopes and most of his resources on his huge and well pampered army.

Bellicose pronouncements such as President Bush's labeling North Korea a part of "Axis of Evil" and proclaiming in March 2004 that the United States would not "tolerate" a nuclear North Korea have been underlined by such actions as holding naval maneuvers off North Korea in October 2004 (International Herald Tribune, August 24, 2004), sending F111 "stealth" fighter-bombers to positions in range to attack P'yongyang (The New York Times, May 30, 2005), the creation or upgrading of main operating bases (unfortunately named in the military acronym "MOBs") within range to attack the North and cutting off oil supplies to the already impoverished nation. Kim must know that in the face of this threat, he personally has little or no room for negotiation.

This, in brief, is what I guess a North Korean policy planner would start with. So how would he advise his government today. Putting myself in his shoes, I guess that he would advise that, in light of American pronouncements and actions, North Korea would be foolish to give up its nuclear force. Indeed, to deter an American attack, it should enhance its military capacity. Psychologically, moreover, it should seek to convince the United States that it would fight the Americans and their allies, with what the Israelis called the "Samson Option," that is, even to the point of national suicide. Further threats are likely only to convince the North Korean government of its danger and so increase its determination to protect itself at any cost. Someone must be giving Kim Jong Il this advice for it is exactly what North Korea is doing. It recently closed down its electricity-producing nuclear reactors to extract some 8,000 only partially-used fuel rods which will yield enough plutonium for at least one more bomb. (International Herald Tribune, April 19, 2005).

It follows that approaching North Korea in the terms of the "National Defense Strategy of the United States of America" is self-defeating.

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Can Iran be addressed in terms of the 2005 "National Defense Strategy of the United States of America" with a different result?
Unlike North Korea which certainly already possesses nuclear weapons, intelligence specialists believe that Iran is still in the "acquisition" phase. That is, it appears not yet to have a weapon or weapons, but it probably attempting to, and may soon, acquire them. Arguably, [3] then, in this pre-nuclear weapons period, America has room for a much more aggressive policy on Iran than on North Korea.

At least theoretically, America could attack, overwhelm the country and abort Iran's program to acquire nuclear weapons. Alternatively, it could deliver an aerial strike with aircraft or missiles on nuclear or other facilities as Israel did in 1981 on the Osiraq nuclear facility in Iraq. The Israelis have threatened to do the same to Iran. The aim would be either or both to destroy the facilities or so damage Iranian infrastructure as to humiliate and perhaps topple the regime. Is this a real possibility? And is the United States willing for Iran to try it? First the possibility:

The current weapon of choice is the so-called "bunker buster," the B61-11. Engineering studies indicate that such a weapon could not penetrate more than five times its length. To burrow 50 meters, it would have to be 10 meters long. At that length, it would likely crack in half upon impact. In a test on the frozen Alaskan tundra, it failed to penetrate more than about 3 meters. Apparently, it was unable to penetrate at all through granite or reinforced concrete even when from dropped from 40,000 feet and traveling at 300 meters a second. Since at least the major Iranian sites are believed to be hundreds of meters below layers of granite, they are presumably immune to this much publicized weapon. [4] Recognizing this, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld outlined to a Congressional Committee plans (quoted above) for a "robust nuclear earth penetrator." Such a weapon, armed even with a tiny nuclear devise (1 kiloton equivalent) would throw up about 1 million cubic meters of radioactive soil. But it would do little harm to a deeply buried site. From my personal experience with military planners, I assume that consequently they have proposed to increase the explosive force, that is, to move up from 1 kiloton toward 1 megaton with results approaching those outlined at the beginning of this essay.

Would America be willing to use such a device or encourage or assist others to do so? The answer is yes. In a highly publicized move, the United States gave the Israelis both 102 long-range aircraft (the F-16i) and 500 one-ton (conventional-explosive armed) "bunker buster" bombs, some 4,000 other powerful bombs and related guidance equipment that they would need to carry out such a strike. (International Herald Tribune, September 22, 2004). And when asked whether the United States might ask Israel to act against Iran, Vice President Dick Cheney replied that "...the Israelis might well decide to act first." (Los Angeles Times, January 21, 2005)

Alternatively, the United States could attempt through covert action to bring about a coup d'état as it did in Iran in 1953 against the government of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh. Or, finally, it could decide to put ground troops into the country as it has done in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Thus, a sober Iranian government should be amenable to threats. Is this likely?

Were I planning policy for the Iranian government, I would carefully study the recent history of Iraq to see what might be in store for me. Here is what I would see: In the 1980s, with considerable help from America and Britain, Saddam Husain was making progress toward acquisition of nuclear weapons. Flush with oil revenues, he hired experts and bought supplies from many sources. No one in the Reagan or first Bush administrations tried to deter him because he was regarded as useful in containing or defeating Iran. So, as an adviser to the Iranian government, I would at least question how determined America is, in principle, to stop the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Perhaps, I would guess, there is some flexibility in the American policy. After all, America accommodated to China, Israel, India, Pakistan and other countries' acquisition of them. It now is accommodating to North Korea's arsenal of nuclear weapons.

With American help, Saddam did defeat Iran, but his war efforts bankrupted him. Fearing that his own supporters would turn against him unless he could keep fueling the economy on which their private wealth depended, he appealed to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi both to help him with further loans and to stick to OPEC production quotas to keep up the price of oil. Kuwait responded that since the danger of Iran had disappeared, it no longer had any interest in financing Iraq; worse, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi far exceeded their OPEC quotas and thus forced down the price of oil from roughly $19 to $11 a barrel. Saddam became desperate enough to try to rob the Kuwait bank. That was a fatal mistake: he did not have a conventional military machine capable of defending Iraq and lacked the trump card of a nuclear weapon while he was challenging America in the one area it would not tolerate interference, access to energy. So in 1991, the first Bush administration threw him out of Kuwait. Had these events taken place later, when he had acquired a nuclear weapon, the Persian policy planner could reasonably doubt that the United States would have moved militarily against him. But the timetable was dictated by forces he could not control.

Then, despite sanctions and other restraints during the Clinton administration, Iraq's economic condition improved. The price of oil rose and the Iraqis rebuilt what had been destroyed in the invasion. Saddam concluded that the prospects for his regime were favorable enough that he should not, at least for the time being, take the risk of restarting his program to acquire nuclear weapons. He did not even keep his conventional military force up to date. This abstention made him more vulnerable. Since no army he could ever have built would have matched the Americans, Saddam paid the supreme price for not having nuclear weapons. His lack of nuclear weapons made it possible for the Second Bush Administration to attack him in 2003.

So, as an Iranian, I would draw the lessons that, first, abstaining from trying to acquire nuclear weapons would not protect me and that, second, I should take no bold action until my own program actually produced them.

Turning from what happened in Iraq what America might do to Iran, an Iranian policy planner or intelligence analyst would see a rising tide of threat: being told that Iran is part of the "Axis of Evil, " he would note that it is subjected to various sanctions and attempts (through pressure on European commercial suppliers) to prevent it from acquiring the means to defend itself. Iranian intelligence would report that for much of the last two years, the Americans have been over-flying Iran, pin-pointing targets as they did in Iraq before their 2003 invasion (The Washington Post, February 13, 2005) and press attaches stationed in Europe would forward western press reports that America has infiltrated into Iran teams of special forces commandos. (Seymour Hirsch, The New Yorker, January 2005) More disturbing still, they read on the internet the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, which states baldly (Section III/B/2) how the Americans are creating "MOBs" from which they can quickly and relatively easily "employ military power." At glance at the map show that Iran is almost completely surrounded by military bases in Iraq, Qatar, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Turkey. If I am in any doubt about the capability and intent, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld publicly removed it: they said that "a U.S. attack on Iran is not imminent but that the option remains available." (The Washington Post, February 13, 2005).

Under these circumstances, what would an Iranian policy planner advise his government to do? Soberly, he would have to face the fact that Iran has even less conventional military capacity than Saddam Husain had. He would conclude that Iran's only hope would be to make an invasion so costly that the United States would be deterred. To accomplish this, Iran has four assets:
The first is that, if attacked, Iran could mount a guerrilla war. Prudently, an Iranian policy planner would urge the government to prepare itself. That advice has

been taken. The Associated Press reported on March 26, 2005 that “Iran is quietly building a stockpile of thousands of high-tech small arms and other military equipment – from armor-piercing rifles to night-vision goggles…[despite U.S.] sanctions on dozens of companies worldwide…”

As a member of the Iranian governing coalition, the policy planner would be aware that the governing religious establishment is not popular with many Iranians, but he would also know that Iranians are firm nationalists. No more than the Iraqis in 2003 or the Cubans in the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 would Iranians be out in the streets with flowers in their hands welcoming foreign troops. The 150,000 members of the Revolutionary Guard would spearhead a guerrilla resistance. They showed their fanatical devotion to their country during the Iraq-Iran war and almost certainly would do so again. Iran is large and has several times the population of Iraq; so it could, and almost certainly would, fight a protracted guerrilla war.

Iran’s second asset is that an attack on Iran is unlikely to be popular in America. Still mired in the Iraqi “quicksand,” and not doing well there, even senior American military officers believe the war could last for “…many years…and could still fail…” (The New York Times on May 19) British predictions are even more pessimistic: some senior British officials speak of “a decades-long problem…” (Peter Beaumont, The Observer, February 13, 2005) America is also still far short of “victory” in Afghanistan and is encountering “a bloody Taliban resurgence.” (The Guardian, June 20, 2005) Consequently, Americans would probably not have much stomach for another guerrilla war. There are also signs that Americans are no longer exactly “flocking to the colors” and that the American military is being forced to lower its standards to meet its manpower needs. (The Guardian, June 4, 2005) Public opinion polls report that less than half (42%) of the American population now approves of the Bush administration and only 1 in 3 Americans approves of its Republican-dominated and relatively bellicose Congress. (The New York Times, June 16, 2005)
The third asset is that, unlike remote and isolated North Korea, Iran has foreign friends and allies. Shi'ism is a vital part of Islam and has millions of adherents outside of Iran. The oil of Saudi Arabia is produced in the largely Shi'a Eastern province. Shi'is constitute large parts of the populations of the Gulf States, Pakistan and even Turkey. In Lebanon, the most powerful single political group, Hizbullah, is a Shi’a-based movement. And, of course, Iraq now has a Shi'a-led government. (Paradoxically, insuring the success of the Iraqi Shi'a establishment (the marjiyah) was the most significant gift of America to Iran. [5]) An American attack on Iran would push the Iraqis Shi'is into what has been heretofore a mainly Sunni resistance; it would do more to unite Sunnis and Shi'is than any effort they could mount on their own behalf. Almost certainly eventually if not immediately, this would enormously expand forces the Americans consider to be “terrorists” not only in Iraq but throughout the Muslim world. Moreover, as they have shown, Shi'is are usually far more determined fighters than any other group including the Sunni followers of Usama bin Ladin.

Iran’s fourth asset is that, unlike North Korea, it is a significant trading partner with countries and multinational corporations in much of Europe and Asia. So keen to do business with Iran are many of them that they have flouted American-imposed sanctions and have sought to work toward a peaceful accommodation of Iran in the United Nations and the European Union. Before, during and after the overthrow of the Shah’s government, this asset proved of great importance to Iran. It will continue to be so.
But, Persian intelligence analysts, like the rest of us, realize that governments do not always act on rational assessments. Sometimes they are driven by ideology or by political considerations unrelated to the immediate issue. Sometimes they engage in wishful thinking or listen to the siren song of those who are desperate for their help. As in Iraq, exile groups tell the Americans that the Iranian government is weak and that the people are only waiting for a signal to overthrow it or that, with a little help, they can do so. This assessment comes not only from surviving members of the old regime but also from the radical Mujahiddin-e khalq. So, despite what would appear to an Iranian policy planner as logical, he would wish to be certain. The best way to approach certainty would be to acquire nuclear weapons. That, after all, is what all the other nuclear powers -- the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and now North Korea – have done.

The “acquisition phase” is a time of great danger. Iranians must assume that America, Israel and perhaps others will try to stop Iran from actually getting nuclear weapons. Therefore a prudent Iranian policy planner would advise his government to move as rapidly as possible. One objective would be to acquire a copy of the engineering plans that disappeared from the International Atomic Energy Agency; this might obviate the need for testing. Perhaps this has already been done. A second prudent action, would be to deploy production facilities as secretly, widely and deeply as feasible to make their destruction difficult or impossible. This too has already been done. A third possible action would be to purchase components on the world market. Iran did purchase centrifuges from Pakistan (Associated Press in the International Herald Tribune, March 11, 2005). A fourth option would be to try, if possible, to buy a completed weapon. No one knows if this has happened.

(Parenthetically, to show that my hypothetical Iran policy planner is not just a wooly minded Persian mullah, a distinguished student of strategy at the Hebrew University in Israel commented [6] that “Had the Iranians not tried to build nuclear weapons, they would be crazy.”)

During this dangerous acquisition period, which might last until, perhaps, 2007 or 2008, a prudent Iranian government would seek to throw dust in the eyes of would-be attackers. The “dust” could consist of the claim that Iran’s program is purely for the production of energy and so is both peaceful and legal under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and/or that under appropriate circumstances Iran would drop work on weapons. Diplomatically, it could hold endless discussions on terms and conditions with the International Atomic Energy Agency, with the European Union and its component governments, and, even if indirectly, with the United States seeking to drive a wedge between the Americans and other powers. [7] Numerous articles in the press show that this is exactly what has happened. [8]

Evidently, Iran has decided to press ahead with acquisition of at least the potential to acquire nuclear weapons. In my next piece, I will discuss what might dissuade it from following this path, what we can do relative to North Korea and how we can encourage other nations to abstain.

[1] www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/dod/nds-usa_mar2005.htm
[2] The italicized words appear thus in the policy paper.
[3] A recent argument for this policy is given by Kenneth M. Pollack in The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America (New York: Random House, 2005). In a previous book, The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq, Mr. Pollack urged the invasion of Iraq. He now says that his advice was wrong.
[4] Benjamin Phelan “Buried Truths,” Harpers, December 2004.
[5] The Iraqi Shi'i United Iraqi Alliance won almost half the votes in the recent election and dominates the government. Many of its leaders, including Grand Ayatollah Ali as-Sistani have spent much of their lives in Iran, are close to its ruling religious establishment, and share its beliefs. Its militia is Iranian-trained. Even the Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani, a Sunni, has very close ties to Iran.
[6] Martin van Creveld, “Israel planning to attack Iran?” International Herald Tribune, August 21-22, 2004.
[7] Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations commented in the May 6, 2005 International Herald Tribune that Iran “has managed its nuclear negotiations rather effectively [so that the] longer the negotiations go on, the more likely it is that the United States, and not Iran, will once more stand isolated.”
[8] The International Herald Tribune mostly drawing from The New York Times: e.g. April 6, May 16, May 19. In the May 19, 2005 article Hossein Mousavian from the Supreme National Security Council was quoted as saying “Iran is 100 percent flexible, open, ready to negotiation, to compromise on any mechanism, but not cession.”

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