

HOW BEST TO UNTANGLE THE PERSIAN PUZZLE?

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Abstract

This study endeavors to find a solution to the predicaments in which the Islamic Republic of Iran presently finds itself to be within the comity of nations in general and with the US in particular. Out of many options available, the response has been configured out to unravel the mystery against the most doable that is of going to war against allowing the emergence of a nuclear Iran or else entering into a deal with them. Notwithstanding Iran's intransigence and stubborn behavior, the research finds that it is, in fact, the prevalent international system led by the US and not the Islamic Republic of Iran which actually holds the key to this impasse. It is assumed by the study that US reliance on the precincts of Realism or Idealism in tackling the Iranian imbroglio would ultimately decide upon Iran's continuum as an enigma or otherwise.

Keywords: US, Iran, Nuclear Deal, Sanctions, Enigma.

Introduction

Iran exceedingly resembles Russia (then USSR) of the 1930s. It has, in fact, become a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.¹ Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to uncover the reasons for which Iran has become an enigma and then to find the best possible options to untangle the puzzle. While a listing of all possible options may not be within the scope of this article but as a guide, the foreign policy's assertion of eight possible ways² to deal with this problem, though, seems plausible but too broad-based in reaching to the core of the problem. However, in order to simplify the answer to the most comprehensive of the responses, this paper endeavors to examine three most-likely ways for unraveling this puzzle; first, of going to war; second, to work out a comprehensive deal, such as the recent Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA); and third, to explore possible effects of a nuclearize Iran in the region.

The paper after narrowing down the options applies comparative analysis to include both pros and cons of each of the three options so as to reach the best possible alternative for un-raveling the Iranian problem. The study astonishingly finds the US to be more responsible than Iran for the chaos in the region and the predicament in which Iran happens to be overwhelmed with.

Historical Background

Modern Iran – the old historic region of the West Asia – was earlier known as Persia. This term was in use since ages by southern Iran's inhabitants, who alternatively

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referred it to as Pars or Pers.³ Iran is also known as “Land of Aryans” deriving it from the word Aryan or Arya.⁴ The name ‘Iran’ was officially adopted in 1935.⁵ The 83 million Iranians,⁶ unlike most countries, live in mountains instead of plains.⁷ Its geostrategic location in Central Asia and the Middle East gives her unique importance and its ability to defend its geographical frontiers due to difficult and impassable terrain and cultural identity makes her distinctly apart from any other nation in the region.⁸

Iran is also considered a regional bulwark due to an abundance of energy resources and its high standing in the world economic and energy calculus.⁹ According to a US-based survey, Tehran has the world’s proven second-largest gas and fourth-largest oil reserves.¹⁰ Iranian civilization is one of the world’s oldest. They are immensely proud of their culture and heritage. A glance into their history reveals that the nation, notwithstanding the type of government, has consistently exerted a powerful influence over its neighboring countries.¹¹

Geopolitical Imperatives of Iran

There is a need to probe the reasons that how a country which was once the ‘apple of the eye’ of Americans and one of the main player of the ‘Twin Pillars’ policy¹² be called the ‘axis of the evil’ and then despite all the wrong accolades once again found itself to be on the favored-list of the US administration. But, before the continuing saga of love and hate relationship between the US and Iran is dilated in more detail, it is pertinent to understand some of the basic facts about Iran.

The US and Iran were great allies in the early days of the Cold War. Washington in order to checkmate the Soviet influence gave economic wherewithal and military assistance to Tehran. The US tried to manipulate Iran through the Iraqi card and later by installing Raza Shah Pahlavi in 1953,¹³ which did not go well with the people of Iran who blamed the West for supporting a repressive and unpopular regime; resultantly, as a sequel to the Iranian revolution, people stormed the US Embassy in November 1979 and held 52 Americans as hostages for well over a year. The ouster of Shah brought the blossoming relations to a grinding halt in 1979 and to date, there are no diplomatic relations between the two old allies.¹⁴

The frozen relations further deteriorated with the clubbing of Iran along with Iraq and North Korea by President Bush as “Axis of Evil,” who were allegedly involved in nuclear proliferation and building of long-range missiles.¹⁵ Subsequently, the Iran Nuclear Deal which came as a result of President Obama’s efforts, could have warmed the relations between the two warring nations and given much-needed stability to the region but President Trump’s walking out of the deal, the subsequent imposition of sanctions and assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani¹⁶ have once again turned the region on its head.

Major Conclusions from Iran’s Geography

Iran is bestowed with two formidable mountain ranges – Zagros and Elburz – which provide a defensive barrier. It has also a strong intermediate defensive line

against Afghanistan and Iraq. Unlike Iraq, it is quite difficult to invade, isolate, or blockade Iran.¹⁷ Stretching to the Persian Gulf from the Caspian Sea and onwards to the Indian Ocean and then to Hindukush from the Iraqi rivers, Iran is a country with 800 miles of coastline along Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. Iran's seaport, Bandar Abbas in the Strait of Hormuz, is strategically important and considered to be highly vulnerable to any interdiction. Iran is, therefore, a land power than a maritime authority.¹⁸ Iran, being walled by mountains on its three sides, sea waters on the other and badland in the center, is almost impossible to conquer. The Mongols did so only once from the North while the Ottomans coming from the Zagros stopped around the Caspian.¹⁹ However, Iran's greatest threat is posed by the big powers that are from outside this region. Tehran was, previously, a gateway to India for any power coming from Europe. Besides, their main concern remained the manipulation by foreign powers to use their position as a platform to foment ethnic dissent in Iran.²⁰

For Iran, the foremost geo-compulsion is to secure its border and further ensure its internal stability and cohesion. Salient are:²¹

- To secure the mountains of Zagros and Elburz in order to negate any incursion from the West and North.
- To secure the secondary line of defense as formed by the borders on the East to the Caucasus in order to negate any threat from Russia, Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- To defend Shatt al-Arab by protecting the western coast in the Gulf region.
- To manage and manipulate any diverse religious and ethnic groupings.
- To secure the borders against any incursion by the major powers, especially those from outside of the region.

Likely Responses against the Iranian Threats

Notwithstanding the host of options as forwarded by many, it is imperative to look into a little more detail about the pros and cons, and the efficacy of each of the three most likely or doable responses.

Attacking Iran

Much has changed in Iran during recent years less one fact and that is Iran's nuclear program which is not likely to be deterred by diplomacy alone.²² Since diplomacy is not to yield the desired results, therefore, it leaves only two options for the US to choose and that is to either attack Iran or let it acquire a nuclear bomb. Any debate about the US attack on Iran is sure to bring out resistance in the US but Washington would be wrong to pay attention to the arguments of those who would voice moral objections to such an attack. If the policies that oversee the international structure including the nuclear nonproliferation regime are to have any sense, they must be imposed. Yet the increase in nuclear weapons seriously endangers the global

security environment. If Washington believes that it is vital to thwart other countries from acquiring nuclear weapons then it ought to be prepared in principle to use power to realize that objective. Former US Presidents have openly declared for quite some time that they would keep all options²³ open to stop Iran from making a nuclear weapon including military action under definite circumstances. Therefore, it is important to see the major implications of 'Attacking Iran' as an option to untangle the dilemma.

Military Action – Benefits

A wholesome study by Wilson Centre²⁴ contemplates that a pre-emptive military action by the US can delay Iran's capacity to build a nuclear weapon for about four years. The delay can be as a consequence of damages to Tehran's present nuclear services. Iran's weakening ability to reconstruct similar facilities or damage to its military prowess is likely to have broader strategic benefits for the US. Salient being:

- **Damaging Iran's Nuclear Installations:** Intense US attacks can destroy or damage Tehran's main enrichment and conversion installations in Natanz, Esfahan, Tehran, and as yet incomplete heavy water reactor at Arak. While a debate is on whether one bomb could destroy Fardow, or a series of bunker-buster shells would be required to neutralize the facilities storing 20% of the stockpile of enriched uranium permanently or otherwise.²⁵
- **Inability to Reestablish Nuclear Installations:** Tehran's response to restart its nuclear weapon program can be considerably weakened by the US attacks on places housing their components of centrifuges. Since these things are mostly procured from abroad, therefore, any damage to them will be irreparable.²⁶
- **Hurting Military Prowess:** There is a likelihood to damage Iran's air defense system and armed forces network of communication, command and control centers. There is also a chance of destruction of Iranian retaliatory mechanisms, such as missile and rocket-launching sites and the main military bases.
- **Deterrence against Proliferation:** Attacking Iran's nuclear installations by US forces would send a strong message for any nuclear aspiring country. Additionally, it will also allay the fear of the US abandoning close friends in the hour of need and that nuclear proliferation is the last thing that will be allowed by Washington.

Military Action – Costs

Any initiation of a deterrent action against Tehran notwithstanding even narrow objectives are likely to engulf the entire region into uncertainty. The US would also have to confront global backlash and negative consequences for such an action.

Also, any future cost of military action may not be easy to foretell the likely reaction of both Iran and other regional states.

- **Cost of Direct Retaliation by Iran:** It is expected that Iran in most probability is likely to hit back despite many people's reservations that Iran would stay short of inciting a larger US retaliation. Even a symbolic strike back in the shape of a missile attack could cost both lives and material of the US. Iran is believed to have developed a credible ballistic missile program besides their nuclear program.²⁷ Tehran may, however, limit the extent of their retribution so as to get support and consideration of main regional countries and the global fraternity as being the sufferer is likely to accrue more political mileage.
- **Striking Back at the US:** Reprisal would possibly involve Tehran's irregular conventional force potentials. Iran would feel like to keep away from a direct armed confrontation with the US and would instead target Israeli and US installations or a mix of it, thereof.
- **Closure of Hormuz:** In retaliation against any military attack, Tehran may choose to close the Strait. Almost one-fifth of the world's petroleum goes through it.²⁸ Closure of the Strait has all the ingredients to upset the volatile gas and oil market worldwide. It can also upset countries like China and Russia. Iran may also contemplate that by closing the Strait, the world may pressure the US to deescalate.
- **Global and Regional Costs:** The global and long-term costs to US interests in the longer run are not only going to be colossal but will be very difficult to approximate.
- **Increased Chances of Iran Becoming a Nuclear State:** Diplomatic talks before any military action can prove beneficial. But once a military strike takes place, it will be next to impossible to sit and talk unless the Iran surrenders (which seems most unlikely).

As discussed above, the only way to capitulate Iran is to have boots on the ground and that too for a long haul. But if all options fail then the world will be forced to contend with a nuclear Iran.²⁹

Nuclear Deal

To reiterate, the US can either agree to a nuclear Iran or gamble an attack that might fail out-and-out inflict only an insignificant delay on their nuclear program or trigger painful responses even it succeeded. When neither alternative is acceptable, it is essential to find a third option. As long as the dilemma of Iran is seen from its nuclear program, the US is in an impracticable place. Therefore, the Persian problem ought to be redefined. One try at the redefinition looks forward to an uprising against the present regime, which does not look to be a workable option. Tehran has easily crushed them in the past and even if they did succeed, it is for sure that it will not create

management any more obliging towards the US. Besides, waiting for a revolution is the only justification for doing nothing and accepting a nuclear Iran than as a strategic alternative.³⁰

Therefore, the third option was finally given a try where all the countries who matter sat down to carve out a deal which fell between the options of 'a war' or 'a nuclear Iran'. The key countries participating in the talks with Iran included the United Nations Security Council's permanent five members (Russia, China, France, US, and UK plus Germany and EU). Intense parleys of two years made the deal possible which aimed to lift the economic sanctions against Iran for agreeing to limit their ability to build a nuclear weapon. Tehran agreed to limit enrichment of uranium by 2/3rd while reducing the number of centrifuges used for enrichment. Iran also consented to decrease the enriched uranium stockpile by about 98% and to limit the uranium enrichment to fewer than 3.67%. In essence, Iran opted for having enriched uranium for its energy needs but not enough to build a nuclear weapon. Additionally, Iran consented to give the right of entry to inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect their nuclear sites. Iran has been constantly seen by IAEA to be complying with the nuclear deal. IAEA, in January 2016, lifted all sanctions related to its nuclear program as they found Iran to be living up to its end of the deal.

Nevertheless, many in Washington were not fully convinced that Iran's ability to make a nuclear weapon was totally-controlled. Part of the accord that will subsequently expire and the sunset clauses were not palatable to them. The deal allowed restrictions on uranium enrichment and limits on use of centrifuges to expire in 2030 and 2025 respectively. It was feared that once these expired, Iran could rush to make a nuclear bomb. "It is clear to me that we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement," President Trump said in May 2018. Trump along with others believed that the accord did not effectively touch Iran's regional behavior or the nuclear program, therefore, it is quite evident that the US is looking for a more restrictive deal with Iran.

As the world witnesses the raising of tensions regarding the consequence of JCPOA, it is important to visit some of the pros and cons of the agreement: -

The Pros

- **It Would Defer Iran's Desire from becoming an Atomic Power:** The main objective of the deal seems to delay Iran from becoming an atomic power by ten years at least.³¹ The work on the accord began in 2015 as it was generally believed that Tehran was two years away from making a useable bomb. This was, in fact, the reason for the hastening of the agreement into a practical shape.
- **Accord Impedes a Race for Weapons in the Region:** If Tehran was left unchecked in their nuclear ambitions and allowed to develop a nuclear bomb, this would have triggered an arms race in the Middle East. The limiting of enrichment allowed prevention from raising the ante and

reduction in chances of outright war and nuclear proliferation in the region.

- **Put a Stop on Iran's Usage of the Latest Centrifuges:** At the time of the accord, Iran had around twenty thousand latest machines enriching the uranium. The accord, however, limited Iran to use only 5000 of its oldest types of centrifuges for the next ten years.³² Ever since the commissioning of the deal, Iran has demolished the core of the plutonium reactor which could have developed a plutonium bomb. Additionally, Iran also moved 97% of its centrifuges from the existing operational centers.
- **Economic Boom for the US Companies:** There were plans for approximately \$100 billion worth of sale in both the oil and gas sectors. Besides, Boeing was found very eager for the deal as it got about \$20 billion deals under its belt for the selling of new aircraft and up-gradation of the existing 1970 vintage fleet.
- **US to minimize its Trade Shortfall:** At the point when the UN Security Committee approved the Iran atomic arrangement, Iran's economy developed practically by 13%. Iran is now exporting only 300,000 barrels of oil each day as against 2.5 million at the time of signing of the accord.³³ Although the nation's monetary yield is not even close to what Canada, China or even Mexico trades with the US but trading with Iran would have helped the US to minimize its trade deficit.
- **Consensus that Iran is Complying:** Despite earlier infringement of past settlements, there is noteworthy proof to recommend that Iran has remained consistent with the provisions of this accord until the late spring of 2019.

The Cons

- **The Deal did not Stop Iran from Becoming a Nuclear Power after 10 Years:** Detractors of JCPOA have worries about the way that this understanding still enables Tehran to continue with the program. Ideally, it would curtail the improvement of warheads and advancement for just 10 years only. Since, there are no assurances that another deal would take place after the expiry of the present one, there are strong indications that this deal accelerates rather than impedes the Iranian quest for the nuclear bomb.
- **No Restrictions Set on Testing Missiles in the Deal:** After the conclusion of the Iran atomic arrangement, the local ballistic rocket tests by Iran were viewed as provocative acts and to be against the spirit of the deal by the US and the UK. Iran contends that the rockets are not intended to carry atomic warheads so they do not violate the arrangements. There will consistently be a fundamental uncertainty that Tehran will ever leave

their desire for an atomic weapon which is precisely the reason the experts think that a political arrangement that gives Iran more cash is a poorly conceived one.

- **Ambiguity Remains on Heavy Water Fuel at Arak:** Arak has a 40 MW atomic plant that makes heavy water. It can furnish enough plutonium for making a few bombs each year. It is strongly felt that there is no need to have a heavy water facility for a peaceful venture. But, still the deal surprisingly remains quiet on it.
- **All Quiet on the Use of ICBMs:** Surprisingly, despite threats from this regime, the US and its partners did not follow their demands to limit the progress of inter-continental ballistic weaponry.
- **Bilateral Relations Left Untouched:** Iran and the US have been daggers drawn since the Islamic Revolution. The Iran nuclear deal seems to have let this problem stay untouched. Notwithstanding the declaration, President Obama conceded that the real motivation behind the accord was to exchange the sanctions for limitations in the atomic program. The Iranian government still observes it to be in a holy war against western beliefs. This deal, however, has shown some signs of hope that even the US and Iran can work out an understanding even for a short while, though.

A Nuclear Iran

While alluding to the third option of a Nuclear Iran, one finds the arguments of Scott Sagan to be very persuasive that the world would become an un-safer place, if more states in the world were to have nuclear weapons as it would render that the deterrent value has failed to create the desired results.³⁴ Also, Iran's acquiring of a nuclear weapon is likely to have a snowball effect in the Middle East but this study finds Kenneth Waltz arguments³⁵ more pertinent and appealing that 'power begs to be balanced' and history is a witness that ever since the end of World War II, no nuclear weapon states have gone into a major war amongst themselves.³⁶ The Middle East needs a balancer to counter Israel's hegemonic aspirations in the region. Waltz feels that Iran's nuclearization will eventually portend well for the region's stability and is likely to provide the required stabilizing effect. So far, it seems that Iran's desire to become a nuclear power is a legitimate one but balancing the equilibrium of stability in the Middle East would be a challenge for this region.

An Alternate Option

There are no issues in the world of international relations that cannot be resolved by involving different and appropriate tools for an amicable resolution. Having said that the Persian Puzzle can still also be resolved, if both the main players truly want it. The US, though, would have to carry the major burden and responsibility. The three main response options were picked after sifting through many options that were under discussion. However, one alternative view which has hardly got noticed but has the

ingredients of solving the issue harmoniously is for the US to take the lead and resolve the main bone of contention between Israel and the Muslim world by amicably solving the Israeli-Palestinian Two-State impasse and then facilitate to resolve the Arab-Persian rivalry. It may be a difficult call but for the overall expected dividends, it at-least deserves an honest try by the US.

Conclusion

The paper endeavored to find reasons what made Iran enigma, it had become, and what are the most doable options available to unravel the mystery. The study found that of all the three options discussed above at length, the military option perhaps seems the most impracticable. This option, though, the most difficult to achieve and even if successful, it will curtail any further bargaining options for the US and would leave them 'high and dry' in the realm of any future diplomatic manipulations. Secondly, the deal is nevertheless a sort of arrangement of mutual benefit between the parties involved. Therefore, whenever a party seems to have achieved the desired benefits, it may try to get out it - the US action is a point in case. The Iran nuclear deal was an understanding of mutual benefit to both the parties discreetly steered and led by the US administration but Trump's entry altered the landscape. Another change might see a reversal and the usual balance of power restored. To expect a permanent solution was never the objective of either party.

Therefore, the third choice, i.e., a nuclear Iran, somehow, appears workable but not going to be acceptable to the US because Israeli factor is too strong to be brushed aside. The US which owes its early rise to the top of the world through its adherence to the virtues of fair play and justice so beautifully enshrined in the age of the Wilsonian Idealism,³⁷ where the famous fourteen points for the world's peace were given. Since, then the US has slowly allowed the Realism to take precedence over the Idealism - in order to maximize its power to manipulate events to suit its varied interests but has in the bargain lost the moral leadership of the world. The ball is now in their court and it remains to be seen as to who finally triumphs - Realism or Idealism?

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