

# THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CRISIS: Avoiding worst-case outcomes

By Mark Fitzpatrick

## Executive Summary

In an IISS Adelphi Paper, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Avoiding worst-case outcomes*, Mark Fitzpatrick, Director of the IISS Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, notes that during 2009, Iran will probably reach the point at which it has produced enough low-enriched uranium to make a nuclear bomb – though it would first have to enrich it further. This will increasingly raise the question of whether military action is needed in the absence of progress in diplomacy. However, the introduction of the Adelphi Paper argues that the question of ‘Iran with the bomb or a bombed Iran’ is a false dichotomy, because bombing Iran would probably do more to spur than to delay the country’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. In the aftermath of an unprovoked attack, Iran could be expected to withdraw from the NPT and engage the full resources of a unified nation in a determined nuclear-weapons-development programme.

In framing the issue, Chapter One describes Iran’s pursuit of uranium enrichment and plutonium production facilities and concludes that its purpose is to acquire a weapons capability. Evidence for this purpose is to be found in the secrecy and deception behind the programme, the military connections and evidence of weapons development work, and the economic illogic of investing in these sensitive technologies without having any power plants that can use the enriched uranium.



Chapter Two assesses Western strategy to date, starting with the denial of supply policy tools employed for two decades and the more recent ‘demand-side’ strategies employing both sanctions and incentives. The strategies have failed in the past five years to stop Iran but this does not mean Iran is ‘winning.’ The outcome so far can best be characterized as ‘lose-lose.’

Chapter Three analyzes options for trying to keep Iran’s programme non-weaponised. Although the distinction is blurred in Iran’s case, being able to enrich uranium is not equivalent to having a nuclear

weapon. The trick is how to build barriers between a latent Iranian nuclear weapons capability and actual weapons production. Recognizing the reality that Iran has such a latent capability need not mean accepting Iranian enrichment as legitimate. Iran's uranium enrichment activity in defiance of five Security Council resolutions puts the nation in continuous breach of international law.

Assuming that Iran has not given up its weapons purpose, the paper assesses that Iran would not accept any limitations that would impede it from achieving a weapons capability. The problem can only be solved if Iran makes a strategic decision not to seek a nuclear weapons capability. Based on Iran's past diplomacy, it can be expected to neither accept nor reject proposed restrictions, but rather to shunt them aside through non-responsive counter-proposals and endless negotiation and filibuster. Meanwhile, if the Security Council were to take a fallback position that accepted enrichment in Iran, doing so would incur the immediate cost of establishing a new negotiation benchmark.

The Adelphi Paper assesses various fallback options that have been offered for legalizing Iran's enrichment in exchange for intrusive inspections and constraints on the programme. In theory, the concept of a multinational enrichment facility on Iranian soil may be the 'least bad' option, but in practice it is infeasible and would increase the net proliferation risk. On one hand, the risks of diversion and clandestine operations would be lowered by options that increased international knowledge about Iran's nuclear programmes. But if this meant legalizing Iran's programme, the result would be greater access to foreign technology and thereby an increased risk if Iran withdrew from the NPT. Legitimising enrichment in Iran would also contribute to the risk

of a regional proliferation cascade by stimulating interest in enrichment elsewhere in the region.

Fitzpatrick concludes that the risks are best minimised by reinforcing the options presented to Iran of cooperation or isolation. If Iran continues to defy the Security Council, its enrichment programme can be constrained and delayed by export controls, sanctions, financial pressure, interdiction and other means of exploiting Iran's vulnerabilities. The West, in particular the United States, should seek to engage Iran. If Tehran shows a willingness to negotiate, incentives can be tabled, including ways to address Iran's security concerns through an inclusive regional security structure.

In the likely event that Iran does acquire a latent nuclear-weapons capability, containment and deterrence strategies will be critical to keeping Iran from crossing the line to weapons production. Deterrence policies were employed effectively during the Cold War against far more powerful opponents, and there is reason to believe that such policies would be effective in forestalling the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran. A dual policy of engagement and sanctions, with containment strategies targeted at limiting Iranian access to sensitive technologies and materials, is still the best way to test possibilities for Iranian cooperation while maintaining vigilance and controls to limit the nuclear-proliferation threat.

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