

Iran's nuclear brinkmanship

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Bhaskar Balakrishnan

Iran's nuclear programme has reached a critical point, presenting a challenge to the key players in the region, especially the US. After several months of talks, the new regimes in Teheran and Washington have been unable to reach common ground.

The Obama administration had indicated a deadline of December 31, 2009, for Iran to accept the nuclear deal offered through the IAEA which aims to ease concerns that Iran could build a nuclear weapon by reducing its stockpile of low-enriched uranium. Under the proposal, the uranium would be shipped to France and Russia in exchange for more highly enriched fuel rods that are not suitable for use in weapons. Iran had initially spurned this offer, but has recently indicated that it would agree to such a deal involving Turkey. This offers some hope for a peaceful resolution.

The US House has already approved by 412-12 new sanctions against Iran, and the Senate is considering a similar move, although opponents of sanctions argue that it would harden Iran's resolve, and weaken the reform movement within Iran.

RIISING TENSION

Iran's leaders have defiantly said that threats and sanctions would fail. Tension is rising between Iran and its supporters on the one hand, and the US, Israel, and their supporters, on the other. This situation poses a serious threat to peace and stability in the region, and could seriously affect global energy supplies.

The IAEA recently censured Iran for not declaring new enrichment facilities being built underground at For-



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do, near Qom, to be fitted with 3000 centrifuges by 2011. Iran claims that this facility is needed in view of threats against the Natanz enrichment facility, and that it is far from operational. But Iran had not adhered to an IAEA guideline it accepted in 2003 of declaring nuclear facilities at the planning stage itself, instead of six months prior to introduction of nuclear materials as in the past.

The UN Security Council, despite US pressure, is not at present united enough on taking punitive action against Iran, due to differences with Russia and China. Five earlier resolutions have been adopted by the Council with little concrete results. UN sanctions are unlikely to be effective against Iran, whose energy exports are needed by many countries.

The NPT permits member-states the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, under safeguarded conditions. Centrifuge technology has emerged as the best and most economical choice for the enrichment process. For peaceful uses, low enriched uranium (LEU) with U-235 content of 3-5 per cent is sufficient for pressurised water reactors (PWRs), the most common form of power reactors.

ENOUGH FEEDSTOCK

However, centrifuge cascades can also be fed with LEU to produce weapons grade high enriched uranium (HEU). For

this to work, a large enough stockpile of LEU has to be available; the cascades have to be optimised, and enough time has to be available for the process. This would imply a "break out" of the NPT. Centrifuge-based plants consume less power, and can be easily put underground in hardened facilities.

Iran has so far built some 8300 centrifuges, not all of which are operating. Improved and more efficient centrifuges are being developed. Iran is estimated to be producing some 2.75 kg per day of low enriched (up to 3.5 per cent U-235) UF₆. Experts estimate that if it decides to "break out" of the NPT, Iran has now enough LEU (over 1,500 kg) to be used as feedstock for producing HEU for one nuclear weapon (by February 2009) and two by February 2010.

The suspicion is that Iran is keeping its nuclear options open while pushing the NPT envelope as far as it can. Disturbing reports have appeared about activities for developing other components such as implosion explosive configuration and neutron triggering devices which can only be used for a nuclear weapon.

Delivery systems such as the Sejil-2 solid-fuelled missile with range of 2000 km have been developed and tested. Defensive systems are being built around its nuclear facilities, to counter possible air strikes. Iran has been lev-

eraging its energy resources to gain diplomatic and political support from consuming countries such as China and India.

Iran has ample reserves of oil (world's third largest proven reserves) and gas (world's second largest proven reserves) for its own use as well as for exports. Arguments against Iran's nuclear power were ironically undercut by US policy during 1974-76, when the US government had enthusiastically endorsed the Shah's grandiose nuclear power programme and even offered Iran a complete 'nuclear fuel cycle'.

President Ford's directive said the "introduction of nuclear power will both provide for the growing needs of Iran's economy and free remaining oil reserves for export or conversion to petrochemicals."

In 1975, Iran also acquired a 10 per cent stake in Eurodif, a French company operating an enrichment plant. A \$4-6 billion contract was given to Germany's KfW for the Bushehr nuclear power project (2x1200 MW). This nuclear honeymoon ended with the Iranian revolution in 1979.

Iran's recent elections have been disputed and there is a significant movement within Iran for reform. The death of Ayatollah Montazeri, the icon of the reformers, has exposed the deep rift and autocratic tendencies of the clergy. Iran's economy has been affected by the global economic slow-

down and shortages of petroleum products.

ISRAEL'S CONCERNS

Iran's nuclear activities have caused deep concern within Israel, with some calling it "an existential threat". Expert assessment is that possible Israeli air strikes (as was done in Iraq and recently in Syria) would not be effective in stopping Iran's nuclear programme. Other options could be commando-style special operations, infiltration and sabotage.

In response, Iran has been gearing up its defence systems, activating its allies, the Hezbollah and Hamas, to step up pressure on Israel. Iran has also been actively seeking a mutual defence pact with Syria under which an attack against one country would be regarded as an attack against both and would provoke the appropriate response. Syria is understandably reluctant to go along as it would be the most affected in the event of a conflict with Israel.

Iran also occupies a strategic location, bordering both Iraq and Afghanistan. Its substantial size and capacity to interdict the oil supply routes through the straits of Hormuz deterred even the aggressive Bush administration from taking pre-emptive military action. The Obama administration, caught in a difficult situation in Afghanistan and looking for a credible and viable exit strategy, can least afford another conflict with Iran.

The mere speculation of a conflict involving Iran and the US is enough to send oil prices skyrocketing.

For India, such a conflict would have particularly serious consequences. It is therefore opportune for Indian policymakers to take a more active role to prevent a conflict, and also prepare for the worst, in case a conflict does break out. The path of engagement and negotiations is the only alternative, and should be encouraged by all stakeholders.

(The author is former Ambassador to Cuba and Greece. blfeedback@thehindu.co.in)