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Business Line

Iran on nuclear overdrive

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The country has made steady progress despite sanctions, frustrating the Western world.

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This month, the IAEA resumes its talks with Iran over inspections related to Iran's nuclear programme. Also, a group of US non-proliferation experts have released a report claiming that Iran could reach the critical point where it could quickly produce one or two nuclear weapons without detection by mid-2014.

Another round of talks between Iran and the P5 (US, UK, France, Russia, China) + Germany is due to take place later this month. These developments refocus attention on the intent and purpose of Iran's nuclear programme — is it peaceful, strategic or both?

Over the past years, Iran has made steady progress in its nuclear programme, despite international pressures and sanctions, led by the US and Western countries. There is now a sense of frustration and impotence among these countries, accentuated by pressures from Israel and conservative political elements.

IRAN'S ADVANCES

Enrichment capacity has increased as more and better centrifuges have been added. The technology was initially acquired from Pakistan. Sizeable amounts of 5 per cent enriched uranium have been accumulated, and some amount of 20 per cent highly enriched uranium has been produced ostensibly for research reactors. There has been some mention by Iranian experts of further enrichment to 60 per cent allegedly for use in nuclear propulsion reactors which Iran does not have.

There are questions about the precise amounts of 5 per cent and 20 per cent enriched uranium stockpiled and in what form (i.e. as hexafluoride gas or as metal).

Going up to 90 per cent enriched uranium (for weapons) is far easier and more rapid starting with 5 per cent or 20 per cent enriched stocks. The centrifuge plants must be fed with gas in the form of uranium hexafluoride (UF6), which is highly corrosive and requires special materials for piping, etc.

The recent Spanish seizure of a clandestine cargo of valves and pipes of Inconel-625 meant for Iran is significant. Maintaining large stocks of enriched UF6 instead of uranium metal is a sign of readiness for possible rapid weapons-related breakout.

Iran could legitimately and easily import enriched uranium for peaceful uses as other countries do, since it has signed the NPT and committed to IAEA safeguards. Why would Iran invest huge sums in setting up economically unviable enrichment plants, not even enough to feed a power reactor programme?

WEAPONS PROGRAMME

The logical answer is that it wants to keep the weapons option open for as long as possible, taking advantage of loopholes within the NPT framework. The issue then is political, not technical.

The latest task with IAEA relate to the Parchin complex, where a large steel containment vessel exists. There is suspicion that explosion tests related to a nuclear weapon are going on there. The IAEA has apparently received some secret information from certain sources about weapons-related activities at Parchim.

However, the Iranians claim that no uranium is being used at Parchim, and therefore the IAEA has no business to inspect this site, and that the results of earlier visits have not been made available. Unfortunately, the NPT left the door open for non-nuclear explosive tests (required for weapons development) as well as computer simulations which enabled nuclear weapons states (NWS or P5) to refine their nuclear weapons (and continue to do so) without actual nuclear testing. Besides the five NWS, others like India, Pakistan and Israel have also used these techniques for weapons development.

Iran, if it seeks to do so now, could claim that these activities are not related to nuclear weapons. The use of high

precision-timed detonators and experiments and computer simulations on explosive compression are significant indications of weapons development.

Also serious is the development of the Arak heavy water reactor, which has the capacity to produce fissile plutonium from natural Uranium. Iran's nuclear chief has claimed that this reactor is "fully operational". However, using this facility for weapons would require an open break from the NPT (as North Korea did in a similar scenario), building separation plants all of which would require considerable time and resources. Iran has probably ruled out this option for possible weapons use, but is keeping it for bargaining.

Iran has also built up its missile capability, air and electronic defence systems. The missile capability has benefited from cooperation with North Korea (which in turn obtained technology from China and gave it also to Pakistan).

Electronic and cyber warfare systems have been improved after a series of cyber attacks on Iranian installations, and the intact capture of a RQ-170 Lockheed Martin Sentinel stealth drone through cyber technology near Afghanistan. Many of Iran's sensitive installations such as centrifuge plants have been put deep underground, effectively protecting them from satellite observation and air strikes. The reason given is threats from Israel and the US.

If this is so, then the answer would be to go in for a specific agreement under UN auspices that forbids a strike on nuclear installations under IAEA safeguards.

AXIS WITH N. KOREA

Meanwhile, the prospects of Iran-North Korea cooperation brighten. The latter has tested an ICBM and can make this technology available to Iran. It also has plenty of natural uranium deposits but lacks enrichment technology, while it has technology for the alternative plutonium route for nuclear weapons which Iran lacks.

Both are under international pressure and sanctions and there is every reason for them to come together.

All this adds up to a scenario where, Iran pursues efforts to reach a stage where it can quickly go nuclear if necessary, while continuing the diplomatic negotiating track to gain time. Added to this is the internal situation with presidential and local elections due on June 14, and the efforts by the Supreme Leader to introduce criteria that would effectively rule out reformist candidates.

The Obama administration has recently proposed Sen. Chuck Hagel as Defence Secretary in the teeth of strong opposition from conservatives and the pro-Israeli lobby.

Hagel is known for his aversion to the military option in dealing with Iran. It remains to be seen how much political capital the Obama administration can spare for the diplomatic track for dealing with Iran's nuclear programme.

(The author is former ambassador to Cuba and Greece.)

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