

Iran Nuclear Programme: Revisiting the Nuclear Debate

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The trajectory of the nuclear program of Iran dates back to the 1950s. The nuclear programme of Iran was assisted by the west in general and the United States of America in particular as part of the Atoms for Peace program (Roe, 2007). The United States and Western European governments continued to support the Iran's nuclear program continued until the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The revolution of 1979 toppled the Shah of Iran (Iran Affairs, 2006). It was 1957 when Iran and The United States of America signed a civil nuclear co-operation agreement. The agreement was signed as a part of the U.S. Atoms for Peace program. As a confidence building measure Iran signed the Partial nuclear test ban treaty (PTBT) on August 9, 1963: and ratified it on December 23, 1963. And more importantly, in July 1968 Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and latter ratified it. Therefore, there was a marriage between the West and Iran and under the Shah regime, Iran initiated a series of motivated nuclear projects that relied on assistance and backing from the United States of America and Europe. The support from the west made it possible for Iran to launch a nuclear programme which presently seems a global concern.

The revolution of 1979 in Iran brought a tremendous change in the policies of the Iran. The revolution was Islamic in nature and it has direct bearing and impact on the nuclear programme of the Tehran. The leader of revolution was Ayatollah Khomeini. He was an Iranian religious leader and politician who saw the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran.

Following the revolution, Khomeini became the country's Supreme Leader, a position created in the constitution as the highest ranking political and religious authority of the nation, which he held until his death.

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He had different idea and vision about the nuclear programme of Iran. He disbanded the clandestine nuclear weapons research program and termed it un-Islamic.

A decade after the Islamic revolution of 1979, some events got unfolded in the history of Iran. The Iran-Iraq war (September 1980 to August 1988) became the talk of the town and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini took place in 1989. At the global level, the communist led bloc of the erstwhile USSR was at the verge of collapse and the order of the world was changing from a bipolar world to a unipolar one. The USA led capitalist bloc emerged as winner in the four and half decade of cold war. In the middle- east, the rise of Israel and weakness of the Arab world became quite visible. The Iran had to fight a war with Iraq and at the same time it had to keep Israel at bay by becoming a regional hegemon. These factors contributed enormously in a change in Iran's nuclear policy. Iran restarted the Small scale research on its nuclear programme during the Iran-Iraq War, and had gone momentous spreading out after the Ayatollah's death in 1989. Iran's nuclear program has included several research sites, two uranium mines, a research reactor, and uranium processing facilities that include three known uranium enrichment plants. This time the restarting of the nuclear programme of Iran was not supported by west and USA. It was rather assisted by the cold war rival of the west (Russia). And after some postponement, Iran's first nuclear power plant, Bushehr I reactor was completed with foremost backing of Russian government agency Rosatom. The reactor was officially opened on 12 September 2011. The Russian support provided a new angle to the nuclear programme of Iran. However, the interest of the China in the Iranian nuclear programme was an important development in the early 1990. In 1992: Iran signed an agreement with China for the building of two 950-megawatt reactors in Darkhovin (Western Iran). Though till date, construction has not yet begun. Similarly in 1993 China provided Iran with an HT-6B Tokamak fusion on reactor that is installed at the Plasma Physics Research Centre of Azad University (Farhang, 2006).

The nuclear programme of Iran was initiated by the support from the west. At this juncture, the west has serious reservations about the same nuclear programme of the Iran which is the product of the west itself. Since the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran, the preferences of the west changed with regard to its policies towards the Iran.

It was neither in the interest of the United States of America nor of other European states to see Iran as a nuclear power in the Middle East region.

Therefore, they pulled back from any sort of backing or assistance to the Iran in its nuclear programme rather the US and West made every attempt to stop the Islamic Republic of Iran to continue or expand the nuclear programme. The support from the Russia and China also is driven by the element of interest. The Russian government would invariably present her own version and vision of inter-state affairs. The China factor in this story is also interest driven. The paper is an effort is to revisit the nuclear debate between proliferation optimists and proliferation pessimists. The study through the prism of proliferation optimists and proliferation pessimists debate tries to explain the behaviour of Iran during the history of its nuclear programme. The research provided some description, analysis and explanation of the nuclear programme of the Iran.

The famous debate between Kenneth N. Waltz and Scot D. Sagan in *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* provided the theoretical underpinning to the study. Most of the literature in this context has been broadly classified into two schools of thought: proliferation optimist school and proliferation pessimist school. The scholars who belong to the category of first school think that nuclear deterrence works across cultures and different political systems. They hold an opinion that the attainment of nuclear weapons by more states does not necessarily undermine the interstate relations and may even create circumstances for a more peaceful world. The scholars, who belong to the second school, however argue that some of the important differences such as technological conditions, political and organisational cultures of the states could obstruct deterrence stability. Kenneth Waltz, an important theorist of international relations belongs to the first school. Scott D. Sagan is the principal proponent of the second school. In what can be termed as the most illuminating scholarly dialogue, these two scholars have put together their arguments in their famous work *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*. The nuclear weapons optimist position flows from the logic of rational deterrence theory. This theory specifies that the possession of nuclear weapons by two states diminishes the chances of war between them as the costs of war and its consequences are immeasurable. Waltz holds a view that more new nuclear weapons states would in fact lead to greater stability on a systemic level. The other scholars who support the Waltzian thesis are Bruce de Mesquita, Peter Lavoy and John Mearsheimer. They believe that nuclear weapons act as tremendous deterrent.

The dominant view emanating from this school is that the rhetoric of threat between the two countries is nothing more than mere rhetoric to deter the other from considering the nuclear option.

Sagan, on the other hand holds a contrary opinion. He debunks the thesis of nuclear optimists and strongly affirms that such an optimistic view of nuclear weapons is risky for the world. He puts his argument within the theoretical underpinning of organisational theory and argues that military organisations in nuclear weapons states go through from certain common biases such as rigid routines and parochial interests that could lead to the breakdown of deterrence and trigger off a major nuclear exchange with catastrophic consequences.

Applying the nuclear pessimists and optimists logic to Iran nuclear programme one can argue that the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran will bring stability in the region. Because it is an open secret that Israel does possess nuclear weapons. So, what India-Pakistan case is in the South Asia, the case of Iran and Israel can be in the Middle East region. Nuclear optimists believe that the south Asian region is more stable due to the presence of nuclear weapons than it was prior the arrival of such weapons. The presence of nuclear weapons in the region will make the region more stable and tension free. This will also limit the length and width of escalation in the region. Both Iran and Israel will be deterred due to the presence of nuclear weapons which in turn will provide stability to the region. Therefore, there is no harm with the nuclear programme of Iran. Nuclear pessimists may contest the argument that the presence of nuclear weapons will stabilise region. Their argument flows from the logic of command and control. Sagan's organizational perspective depicts rationality as relatively easier way of making conjectures about the anticipated behavior of organizations/states by linking it with their supposed interests. This view of rationality however is constrained. In his opinion, it is not sufficient to use these assumptions to make accurate predictions about nuclear proliferation. He argues that in the functioning of large and complex organizations such as military, which is an important component of decision making when it comes to nuclear weapons, various other organizational features such as Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), organizational culture, a general rigidity to adapt to the situation, etc. have to be factored in. Sagan demonstrates such restrictions in their functioning can have great consequences for stable deterrence.

He adds that Organizations are tough when it comes to adapting to changes. The rules of these organisations are rigid and their routines are well-set which makes it difficult for them to adapt to changes.

Organizations are also characterized by multiple, conflicting goals and they usually sift the available information through their predisposed frames of reference crystallized by their unique experiences, training, current responsibility etc. Sagan writes, "To the degree that such narrow organisational interests determine state behavior, a theory of rational state action is seriously weakened" (Sagan, 2002). Sagan includes political dimension to normal 'accidents theory', which creates even greater pessimism about the possibility of organisational accidents. This argument can be neutralized by a counter argument of the nuclear optimists that the command and control of nuclear weapons is not temporary, it is rather very complicated and complex with multiple controls and commands. In short there is no space for any accidental theory as eulogized by the pessimists.

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