

A new Yalta

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In his bid for re-election, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that Iran is a nuclear power, ready (and entitled) to take an active role in running the world. Whether he will be re-elected today remains to be seen, but Iran's nuclear ambitions preceded Ahmadinejad and will undoubtedly continue with his successors.

Assuming Iran succeeds in its goals, what would the world look like under the shadow of an Iranian nuclear arsenal? Does Iran seek nuclear capability merely as an instrument of dissuasion against what it sees as powerful and threatening enemies? Or is the bomb an instrument to fulfil Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East? Can Iran be deterred, much like the Soviet Union was?

To answer, we must grasp the nature of Iran's regime.

Thirty years after its revolution, Iran's regime remains devoted to its founding ideals: not just the establishment of an Islamic order inside Iran, but also its export to the region, in open antagonism with the established Sunni Arab powers, and beyond, in the name of a Shia brand of anti-Western revolutionary zeal.

In the context of Islam, Iran's aim no doubt is to redress what is clearly perceived as a terrible injustice of Islamic history: the dominance of Sunni over Shia Islam.

While traditional Shia Islam sees the origins of this schism - the martyrdom in Karbala of the prophet Mohammed's grandson at the hands of his political adversaries - as a tragedy to mourn, the fiery brand of revolutionary Shiism espoused by Iran's revolutionary clergy viewed it as an injustice to be redressed. This indicated that the era of Sunni dominance could be challenged; under Iran's leadership the Shia would regain its leadership at the expense of the other powers, whose monarchical rule Iran's revolution viewed as the iniquitous outcome of that schism.

Iran's revolutionary world view thus poses a direct challenge to Sunni dominance in the world of Islam and Sunni monarchical rule in the heartland of Islam: Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf. But this should not be construed,

simplistically, as evidence of Shia hatred for Sunni Muslims or proof of the irreconcilable nature of the Shia-Sunni divide.

Iran's revolution seamlessly blended the subversive and the divine - Shia revivalism alongside Marxist revolutionary doctrines - turning Iran into a power constantly searching for a new regional status quo. This synthesis transcended both Iran and Shiism. Its goal was to put Iran at the helm of a revolutionary front stretching across the barrier of Persian-Arab, Shia-Sunni and East-West divisions, in the name of a common struggle against imperialism, the dominance of Western values and their underlying international economic and political order. It proclaims Iranian leadership in a worldwide front of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist forces and it seeks to limit or nullify the influence of its enemies in the region and beyond.

The new world that Iran seeks to create will be dominated by Tehran. It will be characterised by fierce competition with the US for hegemony over the gulf and by efforts to cement alliances to confront Iran's ideological antagonists: America and Israel.

Challenging the regional status quo and the economic, legal and political foundations of the international order remain today at the heart of Iran's revolution. Iran's quest for nuclear weapons must be understood and explained within this context.

Iran's nuclear ambitions do not necessarily serve the logic of apocalyptic politics, though its shrill rhetoric suggests otherwise.

The fact of the matter is, an Iranian bomb would enable Tehran to fulfil the goals of the revolution without using it. For if there is one purpose for nuclear capability, it is power projection; a nuclear bomb is a force multiplier that, as US President Barack Obama aptly said, constitutes a game changer. Iran's success will forever change the Middle East, and for the worse.

Once obtained, an Iranian bomb will set Iran on a collision course with its regional adversaries and its ideological banes. Terrorists will act with impunity under Iran's nuclear umbrella; and neighbours will seek nuclear capability in response. These are givens. Less understood are the dynamics that will emerge even if Iran chooses not to use the bomb against its enemies. Little does it matter that Tehran may act rationally.

Yes, the Western arsenal and an explicit threat to use it may deter Iran against initiating a nuclear strike. But the possibility of an uneasy peace that a nuclear equilibrium may guarantee tells us next to nothing about the conventional proxy wars nuclear powers wage against one another. During the Cold War, the price of nuclear equilibrium - never settled, always fragile - was the recognition of spheres of influence.

If Iran goes nuclear, the Western world will have to negotiate a Middle East Yalta with Tehran, one that may entail a retreat of US forces from the region, an unpleasant bargain for the smaller principalities on the Gulf's shores and an unacceptable one for Israel and Lebanon's Christians. Middle East crises that are difficult to resolve today will become intractable, much like conflicts in Africa and central America had to wait

for the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to be resolved.

And in the end, we may not avoid a conflict, either. Even the Soviet Union and the US teetered on the brink of nuclear war at least once, during the Cuban missile crisis. It happened between two countries who knew each other well, had diplomatic relations, and kept important official and discreet channels of communication open even as they competed for ideological dominance.

Iran and many of its prospective nuclear adversaries do not share such luxury: no Israeli or American embassy in Tehran, no hotline between the supreme leader and the Saudi king. The potential for misreading, misunderstanding and miscalculating is immense, especially as Iran will aggressively pursue its revolutionary aims of changing the region to its own ideological image under the shadow of the bomb.

We can ill afford this risk. That is why Iran must be stopped.