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THE CONSEQUENCES FOR NATO OF A NUCLEAR-ARMED IRAN

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At the time of writing (Summer 2010), it seems reasonable to assume that Iran has reached, or has nearly reached (depending on the definition one adopts) the “nuclear threshold.” However, while NATO is already taking into account the hypothesis of an Iranian threat, notably through its missile defense program, few comprehensive assessments, if any, have been made of what it would mean for NATO to live with a nuclear-armed Iran. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

It is necessary to state the point starkly: a nuclear-armed Iran would have profound, lasting, and far-reaching consequences on many if not most key NATO roles and missions. NATO’s Article 5 may need to be invoked to deter and defend against an Iranian threat or blackmail against Alliance territories. Security partnerships in the Near and Middle East would have to be adapted, if not transformed. NATO’s relationship with Russia would be affected too. NATO’s operations in the neighborhood of Iran would have to take into account the possible impact of Iran’s new status in terms of its projection of influence in those countries. And the existence of a nuclear-armed Iran might also make it more problematic for European countries to embark on new NATO operations in the Middle East or Central Asia.

The exact scope of these consequences is scenario-dependent. At one end of the spectrum, there is a scenario where Iran is widely assumed to possess unassembled nuclear weapons, but has not admitted it (except maybe through vague references to a “strategic deterrence capability”), has refrained from testing them, and has not withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In such a scenario, it is unlikely that all NATO members would consider that there is a serious

Iranian threat to the Alliance of the type that would merit taking concrete measures.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a scenario where Iran has crossed the Rubicon: it has tested a nuclear device and announced its withdrawal from the NPT. Such dramatic developments would be likely to have much more profound political and strategic consequences for NATO, including in terms of external demand for security guarantees. For the purposes of this paper, a middle-of-the-road scenario will be employed, where Iran is simply assumed to be a nuclear power but has not announced itself as such and has not withdrawn from the NPT.

Other parameters would then weigh in. The impact on NATO would vary according to its level of military involvement in any neighboring countries. In addition, the national strategic choices made by Turkey, a key NATO member, would have a profound impact — one way or the other — on the Alliance as a whole.

Article 5 and Iran: Nuclear Weapons, Missile Defense, or Both?

A nuclear-armed Iran would mean that, for the first time in the Alliance’s history, there would be two different, independent nuclear-armed countries at NATO’s immediate territorial borders. Risks for the Alliance’s territorial integrity would be twofold: first, blackmail against one or several NATO countries involved in a military operation in the Middle East; second, a conflict between Turkey and Iran following, for instance, a series of incidents in Kurdistan (more on Turkey’s choices below).

An Iranian nuclear threat should logically be countered primarily through nuclear deterrence. As is well-known, the NATO nuclear deterrent relies primarily, in the eyes of its members, on U.S. nuclear strategic forces. They are complemented by the independent forces of France and the United Kingdom, as well as by some 200 so-called nonstrategic U.S. nuclear weapons permanently stationed in Europe.

There has been, of late, a rejuvenation of the NATO nuclear debate — in particular through the suggestion by several Northern and Central European countries that the United States withdraw its B-61 bombs from Europe, or at least from their territories. It seems unlikely, though, that the Alliance will agree on a complete withdrawal of these weapons any time soon.

However, Iran becoming a nuclear power would undoubtedly have a material impact on NATO's internal nuclear debate. A possible outcome of these deliberations would be for NATO's nuclear weapons to "move south." The weapons would be maintained in Italy and Turkey but withdrawn from Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands (with some of the weapons possibly transferred to other sites in Italy and Turkey, which are currently designated as having "caretaker" status).

What about missile defense? Current NATO missile defense programs aimed at the protection of Alliance territory are explicitly justified in terms of the Iranian nuclear threat. While some governments currently debate the cost-effectiveness of such programs, the emergence of an Iranian nuclear capability would probably lead to a more "sober" assessment of them.

In case of a sudden acceleration of the Iranian program, NATO's deployments would certainly be reconsidered in tandem with the U.S. policy of adapting the missile defense architecture in Europe according to the evolution of the ballistic threat. Here, two key parameters in the Alliance's decision-making would be the Iranian "declaratory policy" (an avowed nuclear capability would have a profound impact on allied public opinions and parliaments) and the reach of Tehran's nuclear-armed missiles (the longer the range, the more NATO is likely to respond in a cohesive fashion).

An open question in this context concerns the balance or "right mix" of nuclear deterrence and ballistic missile defense capabilities to deter Iran. This is a new concern to NATO. During the Cold War, no missile defense capabilities were deployed in Europe. The choices that would be made in this regard would depend on five different parameters:

- 1) The expert Western consensus about the level of "rationality" or receptivity to deterrence of the regime (doubts about this would press in favor of a stronger missile defense effort);
- 2) The Iranian nuclear declaratory policy (an overt, threatening posture would probably lead to increased public support for missile defense);
- 3) NATO member states' policy orientations in terms of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, as well as the existence of options, if any, for bilateral nonstrategic arms control with Russia (calls for the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe are often made in the hope that Moscow would reciprocate);
- 4) The assessed overall level of the non-nuclear missile threat from Iran and the Middle East (generally speaking, missile defense would be seen as more appropriate than nuclear deterrence to deal with non-nuclear ballistic threats); and
- 5) The assessment of the respective costs of effective territorial missile defenses and of the modernization of NATO's common nuclear deterrent (for which funds will be needed in the years 2015-2025).

The Cold War taught us that even a clear and present danger such as the one that the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact represented was far from being enough to foster Alliance cohesion in dealing with an external threat. NATO should not expect that finding the appropriate common deterrence answer to an Iranian nuclear challenge would be much easier.

The Demand for External Security Guarantees

A nuclear Iran would certainly encourage countries in the region to enhance their security in the face of what they would perceive as a significant, and in some cases an existential, threat.

Some may choose the option to embark on their own nuclear weapons program. Egypt, which benefits from U.S. assistance but is hardly eligible for a security guarantee, should be regarded as a country of particular concern in this regard. It would require a far-reaching strategic decision — involving the probable loss of Western assistance. But it is the only other non-nuclear state in the region that today has both the security and prestige motivations and the indigenous technical know-how to go nuclear.

There are also potential second-order proliferation consequences. Given the rivalry between Egypt and Algeria, as well as strong suspicions that Algiers sought a nuclear option in the 1980s, it would be very surprising if Algeria, which has maintained a significant degree of nuclear expertise itself, would then let Egypt become the only Arab nuclear power.

The positions taken by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are very diverse. Even though it does consider that a nuclear Iran would be a potentially deadly threat (including for its custodianship of the holy places of Islam), Saudi Arabia approaches the question of external security guarantees with caution, as does Oman. Generally speaking, due to a mix of national pride and domestic constraints, Riyadh is not interested in an open Western security guarantee. Partly for these reasons, and partly because it does not want another grouping to be a potential competitor to the GCC, it has refrained from adhering to the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), a security and defense cooperation program with NATO.

In addition, Saudi Arabia may have other options for reinforcing its security, including the modernization of its medium-range ballistic missiles, or establishing a nuclear partnership with Pakistan. The smaller Gulf monarchies (Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates) have a different outlook again. Some of them have a burgeoning relationship with NATO through the ICI, transit authorization for forces devoted to the Afghan theater, and participation in NATO Defense College (NDC) activities.

Particularly noteworthy is the direct participation in the Afghanistan operations by a small, but very symbolic contingent from the United Arab Emirates (Jordan has a similar contingent). All of them seem to be interested in increased consultations with the Alliance.

From most accounts, Bahrain and Qatar are currently the most eager to deepen their relationship with NATO. High-level conversations between NATO and the governments of these countries have revealed that their leaders would be very interested in a security guarantee given by the Alliance, including a permanent military presence and perhaps even nuclear weapons.

This might be considered as a backup insurance policy in addition to existing commitments by individual Western countries.

However, NATO should not assume that the Gulf countries would consider the Alliance to be their savior against a nuclear-armed Iran. The trust in Western security guarantees may be diminished after Iran gets the bomb: Western countries will be seen as having failed to prevent Iran from going nuclear.

For some, bandwagoning with the new major power of the region may be an option preferable to alignment with the West. For others, there is a lingering suspicion that a U.S.-Iran reconciliation or grand bargain might be possible. Furthermore, even though it varies from country to country among the GCC members, the political and cultural sensitivity of an increased defense and security partnership with Western countries remains significant. What most Gulf countries seem to be primarily interested in is diversifying their security portfolios.

The Israel Question

And then there is Israel. Even though there is no consensus in the country that a nuclear-armed Iran would be an existential threat, the priority given by the Israeli government to solving the Iranian problem is not a serious matter of dispute. A collective failure by the international community — including Israel itself — to prevent Iran from going nuclear would require the country to reconsider its deterrence and defense options.

From Israel's point of view, a formal security guarantee became a somewhat less attractive proposition from the time the country became a nuclear power in its own right. But Israelis on all sides of the political spectrum welcome U.S. assistance, including the kind of pledge of support in cases of external aggression that was made so robustly by the Bush administration.

Even though there is currently no expectation or demand for it, the prospect of NATO membership would be welcomed by many as an additional layer of security. Some authors point out that an enhanced relationship between Israel and the Atlantic community would also bolster the country's value for the United States, in the manner that the Anglo-American relationship is bolstered by Britain's key role in NATO.

The continued existence of Israel's independent nuclear capability would not be a problem in itself since the country has not developed it illegally and, as the examples of Britain and France show, there is no incompatibility between being in NATO and having one's own independent nuclear capability.

Nevertheless, serious objections would be raised within the Alliance, in particular from NATO members other than the United States. Many would fear to become embroiled in Israel's disputes with its neighbors. And most of them would insist that the Palestinian question is solved before the country was admitted. Israel would not want to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a nonnuclear state (and thus give up its independent nuclear deterrent) as the price for admission, a price that some NATO members may in fact ask for regardless of the fact that Britain and France are nuclear powers. Turkey, for its part, would probably oppose Israel's membership altogether.

Finally, a security guarantee requires clear and recognized borders to be defended, something Israel does not have today.

Only a profound change in the security equation of the region would change perspectives. The combination of a U-turn in the Iranian nuclear policy, real prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian long-term settlement and the recognition of the right of Israel to exist by most key players in the region would simultaneously open the possibility — at least in theory — of establishing a “weapons of mass destruction free zone” in the Middle East and of NATO membership for Israel.

Note that there is a strong level of interdependence between these three conditions: Israel would not give up its nuclear capability without serious assurances that Iran will not go nuclear and that all key neighboring countries will recognize its existence; but it might trade it for a NATO guarantee if there was a general and lasting peace in the region; and states that do not recognize Israel would not do so before an acceptable long-term settlement of the Palestinian question.

It might thus appear that an Israeli-Palestinian peace and the resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis would be preconditions for formal Israeli NATO membership.

As a second-best measure, an enhanced relationship between Israel and NATO might be more realistic. In the past 15 years, Israel and NATO have developed a limited bilateral dialogue and relationship — though Israel believes that it is sometimes less well-treated by the Alliance than, say, Uzbekistan, a member of the Partnership for Peace.

Israel was the first Mediterranean Dialogue country to conclude, in October 2006, an Individual Cooperation Program with NATO. However, the current political configuration of the

region does not easily lend itself to further rapprochement. Most Alliance Mediterranean states oppose it if there is no equivalent reinforcement of dialogue with Arab states. But countries such as Egypt and Algeria are reluctant to engage in further cooperation with NATO as a matter of principle; and the admission of the Palestinian Authority in the Mediterranean Dialogue has been made more complex by the results of the 2006 elections and the Gaza takeover by Hamas in 2007. (In addition, several Arab countries refuse to hold a Mediterranean Dialogue meeting at the ministerial level as long as Avigdor Lieberman holds the position of Israeli Foreign Minister.)

Any serious further intensification of the relationship between Israel and NATO thus seems primarily conditioned by progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Nonetheless, Israel could perhaps help persuade reluctant European countries to increase cooperation with NATO by marketing itself as a security provider — as opposed to most if not all Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative countries, which are essentially security consumers.

Israel participates in the NATO Active Endeavour maritime operation, and has first-class intelligence and analysis on the political and strategic developments in the region, which NATO could benefit from. Israel also has the most advanced and diversified missile defense program outside the United States.

Furthermore, there would be broader advantages for NATO in helping reassure Israel on security matters. Decreasing the sense of isolation often felt in the country would make it more at ease in engaging in peace talks. And it might help in dissuading Tel-Aviv from making any decision publicly to reveal its nuclear capability (so as to bolster the credibility of its deterrent capacity and reassure its own population under a scenario in which Iran has become a nuclear power). Any such move by Israel would considerably increase the domestic pressures in the Arab world for other governments to follow suit and develop nuclear weapons themselves.

The Consequences for NATO Operations
Assuming that Iran would seek further to extend its power and influence in the region once it felt sheltered by a “nuclear umbrella,” what would this mean for NATO operations?

There is no reason why the NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) would be directly and significantly affected by Tehran's new status. Things are different with regard to Afghanistan. But here, again, some of the consequences are scenario-dependent: will NATO still have a significant presence in the Herat region, where Iranian influence is the strongest, when Tehran becomes a nuclear power? If yes, this could spell trouble. The possibility should not be excluded that the Iranian government would also feel more comfortable in cooperating with Western countries where it has common interests (counter-narcotics, for instance). But it is widely suspected that different agencies of the Iranian polity have different and sometimes conflicting agendas regarding Tehran's immediate neighbors.

If the Taliban were ever to regain control of the Herat region despite NATO's efforts, and if they behaved there in ways that affected Iranian interests, then Tehran might be tempted to intervene militarily — something it was apparently close to doing in 1998 after the assassination of two of its diplomats.

A nuclear-armed Iran would also have far-reaching consequences on potential or future NATO operations in the Middle East. Naval forces in the Mediterranean, in the Gulf, or around the Horn of Africa might be called upon as part of a strategy of containment, to monitor traffic and possibly interdict shipments of nuclear-related materials and technologies.

Assuming that having to deal with a nuclear-armed Iran may push Israel and several Arab countries to renew their efforts to solve the Palestinian question (a debatable assumption, but a useful one in terms of scenario-building), there is also the very slight possibility that NATO might be called upon to help support a peace deal in the region. (Iran's new status could encourage it to increase its support for Hamas in Gaza, thus making a peace settlement even more complex to achieve.)

The Alliance has set out three preconditions to a peacekeeping operation in Palestine: a comprehensive peace agreement, the consent of the parties, and a United Nations (UN) mandate. Estimates with regard to the forces needed for a peace support operation in the Palestinian Territories are often within the range of 20,000 to 30,000 troops. An in-depth study of the issue conducted in 2009 for the NATO Defense College suggests that given the risks involved, and based on the Bosnia and Kosovo missions, a much larger force of some 76,000 (including 28,000 for Gaza and 48,000 for the West Bank) would be

preferable. It concludes that NATO is not currently ready to take on this kind of mission, and might never be.

At the same time, the very existence of an Iranian nuclear capability might be a strong disincentive for some NATO countries to participate in any significant way in any new operation in the Near or Middle East (from Gaza to Pakistan) that might be judged by Tehran as being contrary to its own strategic interests. This would be even more true if other countries of the region (Syria, for example) were to be overtly protected by an Iranian "extended deterrent." However shrewdly NATO would try to counter or neutralize them, threats of large-scale terrorism or nuclear blackmail may go a long way to discouraging governments, parliaments, and public opinions from supporting such operations.

The Critical Importance of Turkey's Strategic Choices

Turkey may hold the most important key to the impact on NATO of a nuclear Iran. There are three broad scenarios here.

The first is where Ankara, under an Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP)-led government combined with a continued loss of influence of the armed forces, deepens its "zero problems with the neighborhood" policy, and increases its economic and strategic ties with Iran. In this context, a nuclear-armed Iran would be seen as a potential political rival, but not as a real military threat. A loosening of ties with Europe and the United States would lead to the demand for a withdrawal of U.S. forces (including nuclear) from Turkish territory. Ankara then might consider whether or not it should develop its own nuclear capability.

The second scenario is where a military-dominated regime has a deep crisis of confidence in its relationship with the United States, due, for instance, to strategic divergences vis-à-vis Kurdistan and Iraq, and with Europe, due, for instance, to a referendum in a key European country that would be seen as closing the door to Ankara's potential membership in the EU. In such circumstances — consider Pakistan as an illustration — an independent nuclear program controlled by the armed forces would be seen as a way for the military to cement its grip on power.

The third scenario also envisages a resurgent influence of secular forces (and possibly of the military), but without any major irritants in the relationship with Western allies. Under such

circumstances, Ankara would certainly not be at ease with a nuclear-armed Iran, and would seek to consolidate its ties with the United States and the rest of NATO. It would probably insist on the continued deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons at the Incirlik Air Base, which would considerably grow in relative importance for NATO's deterrence capabilities given its proximity to Iran.

Needless to say, the first two scenarios would be extraordinarily problematic for the Alliance. How could NATO develop its cooperation with Israel, for instance, if one of its members openly sided with Tehran? Could NATO accept the withdrawal from the NPT of one of its members? Wouldn't Turkey's very membership then be open to question both in Brussels and in Ankara? And what would Greece require of its NATO allies to guarantee its security against Ankara?

Unfortunately, the considerable decrease in support for NATO and the United States in Turkey in recent years, as well as the diminished appetite inside the EU for bringing Ankara in as a member, and growing support in Turkey for a nuclear-armed Iran, makes these two scenarios credible, though certainly not probable at this point.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Solving the Iranian issue is not only a matter of great interest to the United States, Europe, and their friends and allies (to say nothing of the nonproliferation regime). It simultaneously represents a major issue for NATO.

At this point in time, it would probably not be appropriate for NATO to seek its own Iran policy. Perceptions of Iran and interests vis-à-vis Tehran differ too much throughout the Alliance. And visibly putting Iran on NATO's agenda might be seen by the hard-liners as a justification for their line that "the West is after us."

However, should Iran be seen to be crossing the nuclear threshold, the stakes for NATO as well as the interaction between them would make such an integrated approach indispensable; the questions of nuclear deterrence, missile defense, Turkey's role in the Alliance, second-order proliferation risks, and partnerships with nonmember countries are all interdependent.

The Alliance would have little choice but to follow a "triple-track policy" of containment, deterrence, and reassurance. Containment would ensure that the political and strategic fallout accompanying Tehran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would

remain as limited as possible. It could be based on the broadening of the mandate and geographical scope of operations Open Shield (Horn of Africa) and Active Endeavour (Mediterranean Sea).

Deterrence would be aimed at countering any attempt by Iran directly to threaten NATO interests. Reassurance would be needed to avoid the prospect of friends and allies embarking on their own nuclear programs, as well as ensuring that other perceived risks and threats would not be neglected. For instance, a strong focus on Iran might be perceived by Poland and the Baltic States as a distraction from a potential Russian threat.

The strategy followed vis-à-vis nonallied friends and partners in the region should not only be aimed at ensuring that they do not develop their own nuclear programs, but also at signifying to Tehran that an attack on or destabilization of Gulf countries would entail the highest risks for the Iranian regime.

In particular, this would mean acting in two different directions: discrete, informal, and personal assurances that national and NATO leaders could convey at the highest possible level to governments of the Gulf region; and official consultation procedures between Gulf countries — and possibly Central Asian countries that neighbor Iran — in case of a threat to the peace and security of the region.

A possible model would be Article 4 of the Washington Treaty: "The parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of any of the Parties is threatened."

The Alliance could also use the language of the so-called Copenhagen Declaration of 1991: the security of friendly countries in the Middle East would be declared as being "of direct and material concern" to NATO. In particular, this should apply to countries offering concrete support and participation in NATO-led operations, such as the United Arab Emirates, which would be encouraged to sign a Status of Forces (SOFA) agreement if they have not done so.

This, in turn, raises the question of whether or not it would be appropriate to set up a single procedure of consultation with NATO for all countries that are parties to the various Alliance partnership programs (the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative)

Increased security commitments toward Arab states would make it politically easier for NATO simultaneously to upgrade its relationship with

Israel. The Alliance would also seek additional participation for Israel in Alliance maritime operations. Finally, it would make it clear that a lasting resolution of the Palestinian question would pave the way for consideration of membership.

Restoring confidence between Turkey and the rest of NATO should be a first-order priority for the United States and Europe. For Europe, this means making it clear that the question of EU membership is not linked with the fact that Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country. For the United States, this means a careful balancing act between its interests in Iraq (the question of how to deal with Kurdistan has often been an irritant in the bilateral relationship). Turkey, for its part, should be persuaded that any break with Western solidarity on Iran may hasten an outcome that Ankara claims to be unacceptable: a military strike on Iran and new and unpredictable conflict dynamics at its borders.

Faced with a nuclear-armed Iran, NATO's deterrence policy might have to undergo significant changes in order for Iran clearly to understand that there is an Alliance-wide consensus that nuclear blackmail by Tehran will not be tolerated. Real-world nuclear crisis exercises may have to be reintroduced. Declaratory policy may have to be adjusted to make it clear that the regime will be held accountable for any explosion of any device of Iranian origin not only on the territory of a member state, but also anywhere in the region; this is to take into account the possibility — however remote — that a faction in the regime might be willing and able to transfer a nuclear weapon to a group such as Hezbollah.

NATO should refrain for now from any drastic and possibly irreversible decision regarding its nuclear posture, such as a complete withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from European territory. Alliance member states should be aware that

countries in the Middle East are watching NATO's performance and staying power in Afghanistan very closely. Should NATO appear to put an end to its mission before its stated objectives are fulfilled, its credibility as a security provider would be diminished in the eyes of both its friends and of its potential adversaries in the region.

A final word should be said on the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran on the NATO-Russia relationship. Assuming that Iran would be perceived as a threat by Moscow, cooperation on missile defense, for instance, could finally become a practical option (though this would depend largely on whether Russia would still see Iran as a "manageable" problem that deterrence can take care of, as it does today).

An increased emphasis by NATO on threats emerging from the Middle East — which may lead, at least in Moscow's eyes, to a lessened focus on the "Russian risk" — could make Moscow more comfortable with the Alliance in general. Other avenues of bilateral cooperation may also be opened in containing Iranian influence in Central Asia. A change for the better in the NATO-Russia relationship would be the silver lining in terms of the consequences for the Alliance of the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Nonetheless, this is surely small comfort, and would hardly represent sufficient compensation for the multiple problems and risks to NATO that a nuclear-armed Iran would still entail.

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