

What Difference Would A Nuclear Iran Mean for U.S. National Interests?

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“What difference would a nuclear Iran mean for U.S. national interests?”

Ultimately, there can be no doubt: Nuclear proliferation in Iran stands to negatively impact United States national interest, by way of undermining U.S. ability to function with respect on the world stage, destabilizing political relationships in the Middle East and around the world, promoting empirical religious rule, and – most obviously – directly endangering the lives of people the world over. The same holds for any nation that proliferates such weaponry; in an ideal world, we could banish the technology from our memories altogether and return to the relative civility of swords and stones. But, alas, the world is not ideal, and neither is the determination of how to approach Iranian nuclear proliferation.

The question presupposes there is any one, “right” definition of *national interests*. But, in reality, the definition shifts with the ideology of whoever is crafting the answer. Advocated by Niccolo Machiavelli, and advanced by the practice of mercantilism, the entire concept set of “nationalism,” “nation-state,” and “national interest” spawned the “realist” school of thought, founded on the pursuit and protection of national interests in foreign relations. Realist thought focuses on states as “key actors in world politics... They continually seek to increase their power as a means of ensuring their security and enhancing their prosperity” (Bennett/Shambaugh, 2008; xxi). In realist thought, states balance and constrain (né, one may add “contain”) against other powerful states, utilizing military force when necessary in defense of national interests. International institutions are useless to a realist, since said institutions are created and maintained by the powerful

states in question; “military capabilities are the ultimate arbiter of which state will prevail at the negotiating table or on the battlefield” (Bennett/Shambaugh, 2008; xxi).

The realist view differs from other foreign policy schools of thought, of course: the “liberal” school sees states as “key actors focused on their own self-interests” (Bennett/Shambaugh, 2008; xxi), but also value international institutions as effective means of serving those interests; meanwhile, the “constructivist” school promotes the belief that the role of states as key actors is a transitory one, that “this was not always so and may not remain so” (Bennett/Shambaugh, 2008; xxii). To the constructivist mindset, Bennett/Shambaugh continue, “both the actors in world politics and the principles (like sovereignty) that define them are *socially constructed*... the result of actors’ behavior, not immutable entities created by the natural world.”

What this means to the definition of “national interest” is that the realist will filter such through a military-focused ideology, the liberal through an ideology of institutionalism and international cooperation, and the constructivist through an actor- and social construct-focused ideology. Per Bennett and Shambaugh:

Each of these three approaches has something important to say about the post-9/11 world. Realism helps us understand why the United States has reacted so strongly to perceived threats, why it has largely acted with and through other states to address the problem of terrorism, and why, as the most powerful actor, it felt that it must and could intervene in Iraq even without a UN resolution specifically authorizing the use of force. Liberalism helps illuminate why even though the United States bypassed the UN on the question of a resolution authorizing force in Iraq, it still found the UN useful in setting up and monitoring elections in Iraq. Constructivism helps us understand the

cultures and values that motivate not just terrorist groups but the many individuals around the world who do not themselves espouse terrorism but do express deep discontent in opinion polls about America's foreign policies.

Ask the realist what the most important "national interest" is, and the response is likely to revolve around defense (and preemptive offense) against outward threats. Ask the liberal, and the threat may still be prevalent, as will be the need to defend against it, but it will also encompass the need for international cooperation and an improvement of one's standing in that environment in order to achieve that end. Ask the constructivist, and one may well hear that defense of human rights violations ranks among the highest points of national interest, since it is the existence of those very violations that is creating the threat that the realists and the liberals wish to defend against.

Different ideologies, different perspectives.

And, as with most everything in the world, the "truth" (if such a thing can be said to exist) lies somewhere in the middle of the pool of answers.

Back to the question at hand, then: How *do* we define that which constitutes "national interest?" Certainly, a state's interests develop from the core of its being, stemming from the very basest of needs. Thus, the **maintenance of sustainability** (economical, ecological, and political) is vital to *any* state's national interest, as are **territorial stability** (stability borders and all that fall within them) and **quality of life** (from basic food and shelter, to plumbing and sanitation). Breaking this down further, Bruce Jentleson outlines the "Four Ps of National Interest" (Jentleson, 2007):

- 1) **Power** (high politics, taking the military out into the world via war; a very "realist" perspective)

- 2) **Principles** (ideals, that for which a state believes it should stand)
- 3) **Peace** (achieved when the daily needs of food, water, and resources are met)
- 4) **Prosperity** (the blend of *low politics* [treaties, trade, etc.] and *high politics* [all matters vital to the survival of the state, generally international in scope and directed toward security])

Ultimately, “national interest” is born out of the interplay of all these factors.

Regarding Iran

Let us look at three separate conclusions on the state of U.S. foreign policy and its relations with Iran; note similarities as well as blatant differences.

First, Kori Schake and Judith Yaphe, in their 2001, pre-9/11 look at Iran’s fledgling nuclear program, whittle down the “national interest” puzzle into four areas of national interest that relate directly to Iran – specifically, that which “could be jeopardized by a nuclear-armed Iran with long-range means of delivery” (Schake/Yaphe, 2001, 45-46). Per their analysis, they conclude that the following national interests will be most at-risk in the case of Iranian nuclear proliferation:

- 1) “Preserving the safety of U.S. territory”;
- 2) “Retaining the ability to use U.S. conventional forces freely in the Middle East”;
- 3) “Sustaining nonproliferation regimes”;

- 4) “Maintaining the willingness of allies and friends to work in coalition with the United States.”

(Schake/Yaphe, 2001; 45-46)

Specifically, these interests are broken down as follows:

“Preserving the safety of U.S. territory.”

Created in pre-9/11 America, it is of interest to note that in 2001, it was the national security strategy stance that “relaxing the assumption that U.S. territory is a sanctuary dramatically raises the cost to the United States of choosing to engage its forces in regional wars” (Schake/Yaphe, 2001; 46). Essentially, the idea is that the U.S. should take up wars in other regions, and keep such things *away* from American soil. Not that any country gleefully courts conflict; but some are more adept at the practice than others. And, in years past, the United States has succumbed to a fantasy ideal which states that “no one can get us over here.” Thus, “An Iran armed with nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles calls the premise of the current strategy into question because the United States will need to evaluate the risk of attack on the U.S. homeland as it considers whether to use force against Iran or states Iran may choose to defend” (Schake/Yaphe, 2001; 46).

“Retaining the ability to use U.S. conventional forces freely in the Middle East.”

The essential idea behind this is that America (arguably) possesses the greatest standing military on the planet, and no other country would be fool enough to confront us but by way of asymmetric warfare. However, a nuclear-armed Iran could actually prove to be a viable threat to the well-being of the United States:

A nuclear-armed Iran could threaten the United States with attacks on its territory or forces to prevent the United States from intervening in areas of importance to Iran. An Iranian threat of this sort could aggravate a crisis in two ways. It would increase the political risk to the United States of using force. It also is likely to slow U.S. response time as measures to reduce the operational impact of nuclear attack against U.S. forces were planned and reviewed... With a nuclear-armed Iran, the United States would need to plan for theater missile defenses sufficient to defend civilian population centers, as well as U.S. force concentrations and key logistics nodes, in GCC states. The increased risk to U.S. forces also could affect American willingness to continue enforcing sanctions and implementing a containment policy against Iraq that threatens military retaliation for a breach in sanctions.

(Schake/Yaphe, 2001; 48-49, 51)

“Sustaining nonproliferation regimes.”

Basically: If Iran decides to ignore the nonproliferation treaty (NPT), then who’s to say other countries – particularly those in that region of the world – won’t decide to simply do the same? Before long, the entire idea of WMD nonproliferation is out the window, and we’re back to fifty more years of cold war. And a successful Iranian nuclear program going completely under the radar of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) would be a slap in the face to everyone involved in the NPT, and emasculate the program entirely, at least in the eyes of other Middle Eastern and Asian nations, whose respect we are awkwardly trying to court, albeit in a clumsy, fumbling manner.

“Maintaining the willingness of allies and friends to work in coalition with the United States.”

An Iran gone nuclear would deal a blow to the face and ego of the United States, which could cascade into lack of respect in any number of *other* areas of national interest.

Convincing other states, real and would-be allies, to follow you down a path when you have proven yourself to be quite ineffectual is a challenge, to say the least.

Second, the Iran Policy Committee (IPC), in 2005, outlined six threats that Iran posed to American national interests:

- 1) “Drive to acquire nuclear weapons”
- 2) “Continuing support for and involvement with terrorist networks”
- 3) “Publicly-stated opposition to the Arab-Israel peace process”
- 4) “Disruptive role in Iraq”
- 5) “Expansionist radical ideology”

- 6) “Denial of basic human rights to its own population”

(Iran Policy Committee, 2005)

IPC descriptions of such include:

Nuclear development:

Iran has been in fast-forward mode on nuclear development for years, and in the early 2000s it is all coming to a head. For years, Iran has used the relative patience and continuing chances granted them by the European nations as a way to stave off American action on their nuclear development. “That pledge [a November 2004 pledge to freeze all enrichment-related activities] led to an agreement among Iran's European interlocutors and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to put a hold on U.S. attempts to

report Iran to the UN Security Council for violations of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The new revelations deal a serious blow to any hopes that Iran intends to forego uranium enrichment en route to a nuclear weapons capability” (Iran Policy Committee, 2005)

Iran as a Sponsor of Terrorist Organizaitons:

The IPC takes a strong stand of this:

Tehran operates at the heart of a network of terrorist organizations engaged in murder, kidnapping, bombing, and other atrocities calculated to sap the will of the United States and the West to resist. Iran's logistical, financial and operational assistance takes the form of providing terrorists safehaven, travel documents such as passports, weapons, training and technical expertise.”

(Iran Policy Committee, 2005)

They list Hezbollah, al Qaeda, Hamas, and others as terrorists networks actively supported by Iran – and actively engaged in terror all over the world.

Undermining Palestiniran-Israeli peace:

By way of Hezbollah, a Shi’a Islamic organization based in Lebanon, dedicated to the ideology developed by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran is believed by many to be continuously throwing a wrench into potential Palestinian-Israeli peace:

Tehran was instrumental in the creation of Lebanese Hizballah, which formed in 1982 under the sponsorship of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who arrived in Lebanon as the vanguard of Khomeini's Islamic revolution. Iran continues to provide Hizballah with money, equipment, training locations, and refuge from extradition. Its overall financial support to Hizballah and Hamas totals tens of millions of dollars in direct subsidies each year.

(Iran Policy Committee, 2005)

Disrupting Iraq:

The IPC also posits that Iran is supporting terrorist organizations in Iraq (among other countries – and other means) in order to distract and otherwise engage U.S. military troops, who would then have no ability to go after Iran, itself. Thus, they are left with a wide open door for nuclear development. Additionally, such actions enforce the strong standing that Iran possesses in the region, and if a country is determined to overrun its neighbors, then Iran stands as the poster child for the passive-aggressive “expansionist ideology.” Indeed, “Iranian meddling is aimed at frustrating the emergence of a stable and representative government in Iraq and also at keeping the United States so occupied in dealing with the insurgency that it would have neither the will nor the resources to pressure Iran on the nuclear issue” (Iran Policy Committee, 2005).

Expansionist radical ideology:

The IPC posits that the extremist wing of Islam is focused solely on expansion at any cost. “Tehran's rulers believe their power lies in awakening the Islamic world to their Islamist ideology. Iran's leadership clearly believes the Islamic Republic's survival depends on the support of such a global force” (Iran Policy Committee, 2005).

Denial of basic human rights:

The IPC points to a December 2004 UN resolution which openly criticized Iran for “public executions, arbitrary sentencing, flogging, stoning, and systematic discrimination against women,” as well as “the execution of minors below eighteen years of age, and the use of torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment,” as well as discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities.

Third, Edward Luttwak, from the book *Taking Sides* (Luttwak, 2008), determined four issues via which Iran is of vital importance to the United States.

- 1) **Iran's strategic geography (and geology)**
- 2) **Cultural interchange (that is to was , the Westernization of Iran)**
- 3) **Religious ultra-extremism's anti-U.S. stance**
- 4) **The historic significance of the Persian culture, which has the potential to not only survive its current oppression, but to rise up and undermine the current regime and replace it with a more Western-friendly version**

Luttwak supports these claims thusly:

Geography/Geology:

Iran's geology makes it rich in oil and other fuels, but its geography garners it far more potential power and importance in the world, and in U.S. interests.

More significant than Iran's geology... is its geography. During the cold war, its northern border on either side and across the waters of the Caspian Sea formed an essential segment of the Western perimeter of containment. Today, it is Iran's very long southern coastline that is of equal strategic importance, dominating as it does the entire Persian Gulf from its narrow southern entrance at the straits of Hormuz to the thin wedge of Iraqi territory at its head. All of the offshore oil- and gas-production platforms in the gulf, all the traffic of oil and gas tankers originating from the jetties of the Arabian peninsula and Iraq, are within easy reach of the Iranian coast."

(Luttwak, 2008; 135)

Cultural exchange:

Luttwak points to a grand cultural interplay between the Iranian and American people, though one could argue that his statements highlight only a pro-American stance from certain Iranians, and glosses over a lack of pro-Iranian interest, culturally, in the States. In that, he is promoting a pro-Western viewpoint that ignores completely the frustrations that so many Muslims have about Western cultural “tunnel vision.” But, I digress.

These impediments are so costly precisely because there is still so much interchange between the two sides, with Iranian-Americans traveling back and forth and not a few operating businesses in Iran while residing in the US, and vice-versa. Beyond that, millions of ordinary Iranians are keenly interested in all that is American, from youth fashions to democratic politics, and nothing can stop them from watching the Farsi-language television stations of Los Angeles; all attempts by Iran’s rulers to prohibit the country’s ubiquitous satellite antennas have failed.

(Luttwak, 2008; 136)

Religious ultra-extremism’s anti-U.S. stance:

A shift from “everyday extremism to a more active ultra-extremism” (Luttwak, 2008; 137) has taken over in Iran to a new degree. Current Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is “an enthusiastic follower... of strict Islamic puritanism” (Luttwak, 2008; 137), a sect that supports tightening the already oppressive cultural reigns and promoting a more extremist, anti-Western stance. This pushes society counter to the direction it was starting to go in Iran, which only a relative few years ago was listing very heavily Westward. But religious ultra-extremism in the political realm has pushed back pro-Western progress, attempting to devolve society in the process. Which leads us to...

The Persian culture:

Luttwak points to extremist Islamic tendencies toward the oppression of the Persian culture – one of the oldest cultures on the planet, rich in art and history. He asserts that a removal of extremists from the political dominion of Iran will usher back the society that existed before the oppression, the soul of the people that remains underneath the harsh rulership – and that would surely be to the United States’ favor. “Along with the reemergence of the country’s suppressed Westernization that dates back to the 1920s, along with the restoration of its own beloved secular Persian culture, one can reasonably expect the United States to return to the scene as Iran’s natural ally,” Luttwak writes (Luttwak, 2008; 138).

So, then, what difference WOULD a nuclear Iran mean to U.S. national interests?

Taking the essence of Jentleson’s “Four Ps of National Interest,” we come back with an interest based in military might, ideals, daily needs, and functioning government.

Combining this with the hodgepodge of national interest analyses covered in the preceding pages, one can conclude that a nuclear Iran stands to negatively influence the following aspects the United States’ own national interests:

FROM THE “POWER” SECTOR:

- 1) A nuclear Iran could undermine U.S. standing and reputation amongst allies across the world, and make far more complicated and difficult America’s ability to enforce, well, *anything*.
- 2) Continuing involvement with terrorist networks not only undermine U.S. ability and stance in the Middle East (and the rest of the world), but also

endanger U.S. well being on home soil. Access to nuclear technology obviously ups that ante significantly.

- 3) If Iran ignores the nonproliferation treaty, and gets away with it, then it is an open door for other countries to do the same – a situation most have been trying to avoid since the bomb was invented.

FROM THE “PRINCIPLES” SECTOR:

- 1) The expansionist ultra-extremism of Iran’s religiously-charged government results in the oppression of the Iranian people and threatens the freedom and well being of the region. Nuclear weapons only give the government that much more power, and that much less incentive to change.

FROM THE “PEACE” SECTOR:

- 1) Iranian support of Hezbollah undermines Palestinian-Israeli peace, or at least contributes to such. Iran with a nuke is, by association, Hezbollah with a nuke.
- 2) Iranian support of terrorist organizations, in general, undermines peace by definition. See prior point, but apply it to *everywhere*.

FROM THE “PROSPERITY” SECTOR:

- 1) Iran is not likely to undermine our ability to function as a government, so I suppose we have that going for us.

In short, Iranian proliferation of nuclear weapons *does* pose a threat to U.S. national interests. It poses a threat to the interests of *every* nation, including Iran’s own. Though, to be fair, that depends upon the circumstances of the proliferation.

To close on a quote, we return to the IPC (Iran Policy Committee, 2005), which places into perspective the complexity of the dilemma at hand:

Regarding impact in the region, the nature of the regime in Tehran is of greater import than its nuclear weapons capability: An Iran with representative institutions with a nuclear weapons capability would not be as destabilizing as nuclear weapons in the hands of the unelected, expansionist theocracy. The best outcome is a freely-elected, representative government without nuclear weapons; only with such a government would such an outcome be possible. The nightmare scenario is that a nuclear weapons capability in the hands of an aggressive and repressive regime in Tehran raises the possibility that it could and would collaborate with transnational networks to carry out nuclear terrorism. In any event, of the six critical threats posed by Iran, its drive to acquire nuclear weapons is the first and most urgent.

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