

Iran's actions could spark race for nuclear weapons

If Iran is allowed to develop its nuclear capabilities unchecked, others will stockpile nuclear deterrents to combat the threat, writes Richard Whelan

Last week's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting in Vienna failed to halt Iran's advance towards nuclear weapons and the ball is now in the United Nations Security Council's court. While the permanent members of the council have been trying to broker a compromise ahead of this week's formal discussions at the UN, there appears little prospect of Iran agreeing to tow the line.

The Security Council has the power to impose sanctions on Iran, but it is unclear whether all its members would back them. The speculation is that the council will call on Iran to meet the IAEA's demands over its nuclear programme, without specifying what might happen if it does not comply.

Last week's IAEA meeting heard that it was impossible to verify Iran's claim that its nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes only and referred the matter to the Security Council. Iran's hardline president responded to the decision to involve the council by cranking up his rhetoric. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said the West could not force Iran to give up its right to nuclear power through "bullying and brutality".

"Western countries know that they are not capable of inflicting the slightest blow on the Iranian nation because they need the Iranian nation," said Ahmadinejad.

By not being able to verify Iran's programme, the IAEA, the UN's nuclear watchdog, has failed the ultimate test of its custodianship of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This is now a major challenge for the UN Security Council. Part of the problem is the treaty itself. It is widely accepted that a number of the key premises of the NPT treaty signed in 1970 need updating. Signature of the treaty was voluntary.

Of those countries that signed it, many did not bring into force the required safeguards agreement, and few finalised an additional protocol giving the IAEA authority to inspect and search for undeclared nuclear materials and activities.

Worst of all, to quote Mohammed ElBaradei, director general of the IAEA, "should a state with a fully-developed fuel cycle capability decide, for whatever reason, to break away from its non-proliferation commitments, most experts believe it could produce a nuclear weapon within a matter of months".

What Iran has done over the last three years is to highlight these weaknesses and to move towards a full fuel cycle capability, giving it the ability to produce nuclear weapons if it so wishes. The IAEA report indicated continuing uncertainties on the scope and nature of this programme, even after three years of intensive efforts to clarify this. Thus, the IAEA could not confirm to the UN that Iran is complying with its NPT commitments.

Obtaining assurances that Iran is complying is the first step in preventing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East/Gulf region. The second step – which



Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: says West cannot force Iran to give up its right to nuclear power GETTY

France, Germany, Britain and, latterly, Russia have been working on without success – is to convince Iran to move back from full fuel cycle (weapons) capabilities, even if such are 'legal' under the NPT agreement, in return for economic and diplomatic benefits, including the provision of low-risk uranium which

cannot be used for nuclear weapons.

If Iran continues on its current path, in a few years' time with a fully developed fuel cycle capability, it could legally serve 90 days' notice of withdrawal from the NPT and have nuclear weapons ready for use at the end of that period.

In these circumstances, confidence in

the NPT would evaporate as it would be clearly incapable of achieving its core objective. The impact on its neighbours would be quick and dramatic. They would be concerned, not only about Iran's possible use of nuclear weapons, but also the re-emergence of an aggressive Iranian foreign policy by a regime that is a failure

internally but would be emboldened by its possession of nuclear weapons.

The former United States ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Chas Freeman, has warned that "senior Saudi officials have said privately that, if and when Iran acknowledges having – or is discovered to have – actual nuclear warheads, Saudi Arabia would feel compelled to acquire a deterrent stockpile".

The UAE (United Arab Emirates), which perceives Iran as a strategic adversary, has recently taken delivery of a highly advanced air force capable of penetrating Iranian territory. The UAE, it is feared, might consider acquiring deliverable nuclear weapons from a foreign source.

It is also likely that Egypt, Algeria, Turkey and many of the Gulf states would decide that they needed new security alliances or nuclear weapons to protect themselves. A nuclear arms race could thus quickly accelerate in an already-unstable region.

To Iran, nuclear weapons are not based on historical factors, as they are for Israel, Pakistan and North Korea. Experts liken Iran's approach to that of India. To quote the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London: "Iran's nuclear motives look more like India's, driven by a search for political status and bargaining power more than military security".

In both countries, nuclear activities are embedded in major civilian nuclear programmes. Following its invasion by Iraq, Iran was, for many years, focused on the possible usage of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) against it by its old enemy. In more recent years, the threat of possible regime change imposed by the US has been its principal concern.

In Iran today, the Revolution is seen as a pervasive failure in most areas. However, Iranians see themselves as a great civilisation with a long and glorious history.

The development of a nuclear capability may be the only "success" of the Revolution and the goal enjoys widespread support from conservatives, moderates and the student movement – a key barometer of public opinion.

The current supreme religious leaders in Iran, like Ayatollah Khomeini before him, have ruled that nuclear weapons are contrary to Islam. Building on this, the only solution to this crisis is for the US to agree a "grand bargain" with Iran. The US would guarantee not to enforce regime change, while Iran would agree to develop its civilian nuclear capability in a "safe" fashion.

There is no practical alternative to such a bargain at this point – only the US can give Iran the security assurances it needs to forego the need for nuclear weapons to ensure its survival. Following such a bargain, the UN Security Council could urgently set about addressing the fundamental flaws in the NPT that Iran has so clearly exposed.

Richard Whelan's book, *Al-Qaedaism: The Threat to Islam, The Threat to the World*, is published by Ashfield Press