Thirdly, they provide Iran with a counterpunch to the US's military presence in and around the Persian Gulf and potentially in the Caspian Sea.

Iran's missile programme is thus not surprising in an environment with an established 'missile culture', especially since it is the American's weapon of choice in the Middle East.
Iran has developed a range of missiles. It has short range, surface-to-surface weapons such as the *Fazeat* (80-150km range), *Fadr* and *Zelzal* (200km with 600kg payload). But of greater interest is its ballistic missile programme. The *Shihab*-3 is 16m long and has a range of 1300km. Its successors, the *Shihab*-4 and -5, with greater ranges and payloads will only be used for launching orbiting telecommunications satellites. In February 2000, Iran announced that it was self-sufficient in the production of solid-fuel for rockets. These developments are meant to give credence to Iran's claim that beyond the *Shihab*-3, missile development is intended for peaceful space-based applications, and its leadership continues to point to the hypocrisy and selectivity of those who oppose its missile regime.

However, these claims are not accepted by the US and Israel, Iran's main adversaries. For them any increment in Iran's military capability poses an inherent threat, especially since such a capability harbours within it the potential for developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). For them, the deterrence doctrine is contradicted by Iran's perceived inclination towards strategic ambiguity and obfuscation. Nevertheless, in the absence of agreed international norms on missile proliferation and development, their control is rather difficult although countries such as Iran might be open to incentives and political engagement. In this regard, Iran's chief sources—especially China and Russia—could insist that Iran adhere to terms such as not using nuclear or other WMD warheads on missiles and that it commit itself to a 'no-first-use' doctrine.

Nuclear Weapons
Iran, to its credit, has solemnly adhered to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Chemical and Biological Weapons conventions which proscribe the possession and development of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons (so called WMD). Iran has steadfastly denied Western allegations of its seeking nuclear and WMD capability and hence such programmes exist in a penumbra of doubt and uncertainty. The American and European allegations stem from a cumulative picture based on patterns of procurement, research activities and monitoring. Iran's denials are buttressed by its claims that a focus on it diverts attention from other egregious cases of non-compliance with the NPT, namely, those of Israel, North Korea, Pakistan and India; further that Iran is a member of all major arms-control treaties; it is in good standing with the global watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), allowing periodic inspections of its installations; and its peaceful nuclear programme and right to technology makes sense given the high sunk costs of the Bushire project.

That being said, there are compelling arguments, pro and con, concerning Iran's nuclear weapons option. Firstly, it would be consistent with the key principles of the 1979 Islamic revolution: self-reliance, independence and equality. Secondly, nuclear weapons could serve as a prudent hedge against their existence or emergence in the immediate region. Thirdly, they are attractive to a state which does not have ready access to advanced conventional arms and which is deprived of strategic allies and suppliers. And finally, they could substitute and be an equaliser for Iran's effete conventional arms infrastructure and provide it with an all-purpose diplomatic and military instrument in a world where it continues to be marginalised at the behest of the US.

However, what counts against Iran's nuclear programme is that it is very

much at an embryonic stage. Its development is compounded by that fact that it is entirely dependent on foreign sources of technology and training and hence is easily susceptible to interruption. There is also the practical constraint of retaining enough scientists and experts to advance an indigenous programme. Secondly, Iran has no real existential threats or historic enemies compared to, say, Israel or Pakistan. Thirdly, nuclear weapons do not have a clear military rationale for Iran. It might be situated in a 'dangerous neighbourhood' but the logic of nuclear deterrence would not necessarily make for a more secure regional environment. Finally, although acquiring nuclear weapons could provide a useful symmetry in Iran's relations wit the US and Israel, their possession comes with risk and reprisal and will not necessarily translate into enhanced security.

A further elaboration of these issues can be disaggregated into four inhibiting factors to demonstrate the limited use of nuclear weapons and their doubtful symbolic value:

1. *Practical:* Dependence on foreign technology and training has been already been mentioned. Moreover, illegally acquiring fissile material would not serve any purpose in addressing the longer term problem of self-sufficiency. It is also doubtful whether Iran has the organisational capacity to manage a clandestine programme and insulate it from foreign intelligence, domestic and international political changes and budgetary pressures.
2. *Legal:* As a signatory to the NPT, Iran has renounced the right to develop nuclear weapons. Iran will be subject to an enhanced safeguards system which will greatly facilitate discovery of any clandestine nuclear activity. It can also be expected that any such discovery will be subject to immediate UN Security Council sanction.
3. *Political:* There are great political costs that would have to borne arising from a violation or withdrawal from the NPT. Iran could find itself further isolated, with dire consequences for its important trade and commercial relations with the EU, Japan and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The US especially can be expected to lead a call for international sanctions.
4. *Utilitarian:* Linked to all the above in terms of their costs and benefits, nuclear weapons have little value beyond deterrence of major external threats. Besides, nuclear weapons cannot replace a conventional capability and hence place great financial and scientific infrastructural costs on any country that has nuclear aspirations. (In 2002, Iran's regular armed forces totalled 520 000 with 350 000 reserves. For the year ending March 2003, its defence expenditure was 32,7 billion Iranian Rials (the equivalent of US$ 4,1 billion)).

It can be assumed that the Iranian leadership must be painfully aware of how these inhibiting factors constrain their ambitions. This raises the interesting question of where decisions are made relating to its nuclear and missile programmes. There are no established lobbies for these and therefore decisions would be controlled by a small coterie of politicians outside of the Supreme National Security Council which is responsible for coordinating decisions on national security. The Council has an ever-changing membership based on political patronage and hence, is not a safe haven for maintaining the secrecy needed on nuclear matters but also on sensitive aspects missile development. Likewise the leadership of Iran's Atomic Agency has also been subject to the vagaries of its politics.

Nevertheless, Ayatollah Rafsanjani is widely held to be the custodian-in-chief of Iran's nuclear programme, holding several very important and sensitive positions since the beginning of the revolution in 1979 (acting Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (1987-88); Chairman of the Supreme National Security Council (1989-97); President of Iran (1989-97); and Chairman of the Expediency Council since 1997 (whose

main function is to break stalemates between the parliament or *Majlis* and the Council of Guardians which ensures that laws passed are compatible with Islamic jurisprudence)). Key decisions on issues of national security therefore appear to closely resemble the Byzantine and opaque North Korea model. As a result, Iran's nuclear 'culture', the views of those who shape it and their understanding of its purpose and capability are not subject to any critical parliamentary let alone public scrutiny. It would seem that, given the smallness of the core group who make the important decisions, the search would be for a general capability that is largely ignorant of the technical, political and strategic characteristics of nuclear weapons.

The international—read Western—response is largely predicated on this premise and hence the pressures, threats of isolation and embargoes, etc.. Engaging Iran as far as its NPT obligations are concerned has been seen as the more expedient option.

It is perhaps the sober quality of all these factors and considerations which led Iran to accept limits on its nuclear programme in October 2003, following a visit by the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany. This is widely interpreted as signalling a move away from its combative posture with the US in favour of a more pragmatic understanding of current global dynamics and its national security interests. This change was heralded by Iran's acceptance of the additional protocol to the NPT which would allow for more intrusive international inspections of its nuclear sites and a suspension of activities to enrich weapons-grade uranium. There appears to have been a wide-ranging internal debate which pitted traditionalist hard-liners against a broader coalition of reformists. Thus Reza Khatami (leader of the reformist party in parliament and the brother of President Mohammad Khatami) could proclaim that Iran had to break away from its identification as an 'unpredictable state' and needed to change its behaviour. While the hardliners feared that any concession would be tantamount to national humiliation, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader and most powerful figure in the country, did not renounce the agreement.

This represents perhaps the beginning of a major psychological shift in Iran. It opens the way for an improved engagement with Europe and hopefully, later with the US. The three foreign ministers Jack Straw of Britain, Dominique de Villepin of France and Joschka Fischer of Germany must take some credit for recognising the Iranian's deep national pride and for crafting an agreement which did not compromise Iran's sovereignty and dignity. Indeed, they agreed that Iran has a legal right to develop peaceful nuclear energy and offered cooperation on technology transfers. The quid pro quo, of course, is that Iran cooperate fully with the IAEA regime and the additional protocol of more intrusive inspections.

As a measure of its readiness to comply, Iran gave the IAEA an unconditional commitment to accept the additional protocol and equally importantly, to suspend all uranium-enrichment related activity, specifically at the Natanz site. This opens the way for full-disclosure and verification. What is also noteworthy is that at the 7th meeting of the Joint Bilateral Commission between South Africa and Iran held in Pretoria in July 2003, both sides renewed their commitment to the NPT and recognised the burden of responsibility that comes with an advanced nuclear capability. Iran could certainly benefit greatly from South Africa's experience of voluntary nuclear disarmament and the pursuit of a peaceful programme. An informal dialogue on the positive aspects of non-proliferation would certainly be mutually beneficial.

The progress made to date notwithstanding, the nuclear issue will continue to be subject to Iran's turbulent domestic politics for which it

is often unfairly stigmatised. (Iranians still bristle at being part of George Bush's 'axis of evil'.) This year parliamentary elections effectively marginalised the voice of reformists, tilting the balance in favour of the traditionalists. President Khatami's cautious and incremental reforms now seem inconsequential in the face of resurgent conservative forces, amply backed by the clerical elite. Foreign affairs could be a casualty of this and with it debate about Iran's national security agenda and strategy. The knock-on effects of events in Iraq, growing discomfort with the US military presence in the region, and generally, the worsening situation in the Middle East could return Iran to a more confrontational foreign policy.

The seeming fragility of the Saudi regime and the consequences of Iran's own alleged support for terrorist networks add to the latter's vulnerability. But this could also be turned into an opportunity for the US. As Saudi Arabia reels under an extremist siege, the US should invest greater diplomatic energy in cultivating relations with Iran. This is especially important for securing Iran's participation in managing the changing geo-strategic context of its neighbourhood, whether this concerns the post-Saddam and post-Taliban regimes, the waters of the Gulf, or even the Caucasus.

As Elaine Sciolono observed in *The New York Times* (29 October 2003), Iran's domestic politics "have been driven by a blend of national pride and historic sense of grievance." Ongoing engagement and inclusion that recognises Iran's legitimate national and security interests could pave the way for a more pragmatic accommodation with the West and the nuclear issue might turn out to be an unmitigated blessing. It now simultaneously opens more space for national dialogue away from the realms of secrecy; and it offers greater scope for the preservation of national pride while building a platform for reconciliation between Iran and the international community.

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