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NATO and a Nuclear Iran

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Nato and a Nuclear Iran

Concept Paper¹

7 October 2010

Introduction and Overview

At the time of this writing (Fall 2010), it seems reasonable to assume that Iran has reached, or has nearly reached – depending on the definition one adopts – the “nuclear threshold”. What is meant here by this expression is that Tehran’s progress in all key compartments of a nuclear program have brought the country to a point where, should it decide to do so, it could build an operational weapon in a matter of a very small number of years, or even months in some of the most pessimistic scenarios. It has produced more than 2500 kilos of Low-Enriched of Uranium (LEU) without any economic justification.² It has began enriching significant quantities of uranium to 20% even though such material would have no short- or medium-term civilian usage.³ In parallel, it has conducted extensive weaponization studies. It may have received one or more weapons designs from the so-called A. Q. Khan network. It has also worked since the early 2000s on adaptation to ballistic missiles of a “baby-bottle” reentry vehicle, the ideal shape for carrying a nuclear weapon. No country that has invested so much in those three compartments has ever refrained from crossing the threshold.⁴ Therefore, if history is any guide – and unless some dramatic domestic political developments occur in Tehran – Iran is likely to become a nuclear-capable country in the near future.

While few analysts believe that even the current regime would consider nuclear arms as just another military instrument, a fierce intellectual battle exists as per the answer to the question “can Iran be deterred?”. What is less in debate is that should it possess nuclear weapons, the regime would feel emboldened to project its power and influence

¹ Researching and writing for this paper were made possible by a generous grant from the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS). The author would like in particular to thank Ron Asmus, Director of the Brussels office of the GMFUS, for his personal support. A shorter version of this paper was published a Halifax Paper in November 2010.

² If further enriched to Highly Enriched Uranium (about 90%), this would be enough for roughly two nuclear bombs.

³ Tehran does not have the required technical know-how to make the fuel rods needed for the Tehran Research Reactor – the justification given by Iran for enriching at 20%. Beyond 20%, usage of the product as fissile material begins to be a practical possibility. And for technical reasons – the process is not linear – it is very fast to go from 20% to 90%, the optimal enrichment level for making a bomb.

⁴ Whether or not Tehran has already made a strategic decision to cross the threshold is unclear at this point and probably unknown by Western intelligence services. But there is no recorded case where a country has made the same level of investment in these three domains and has stayed at the threshold for long. India tested a device in 1974, but at that time had not yet worked on weaponization and launchers. Like Pakistan, it crossed the threshold (that is, it built building operational nuclear weapons) in the 1980s. The case of Israel is less well-documented, but open sources indicate that Tel-Aviv had an initial nuclear capability in the late 1960s.

in the region and beyond. A comparison can be made with post-1998 Pakistan: less than a year after it conducted nuclear tests and for the first time openly declared itself a nuclear power, Islamabad sought to alter the regional balance of power by launching attacks in the Kargil region of Kashmir. The crisis almost led to a full-blown war between India and Pakistan, which could very well have turned nuclear.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Alliance Member States are of course keenly aware of these issues. 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.

This paper makes two main arguments:

- 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 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 will 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 for its projection of influence in those countries. But the existence of a nuclear-armed Iran might also make it more problematic for European countries to embark in new NATO operations in the Middle East or Central Asia.
- The exact scope of these consequences are scenario-dependent. At one end of the spectrum, there is a scenario where Iran is widely assumed to have 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 be ready to consider that there is a serious Iranian threat to the Alliance, and to take concrete measures to deal with it. 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 assumed, where there is an agreement that Iran is assumed to be a nuclear power. Other parameters would weigh in. The impact on NATO would vary according to its level of military involvement in neighboring countries when Iran becomes nuclear. In addition, the national strategic choices made by Turkey, a key NATO member, in reaction to a nuclear Iran would have a profound impact – one way or the other – on the Alliance as a whole.

This paper assumes that no military action leading to a significant delaying of Iran's nuclear program, or to a dramatic change in Iran's nuclear policy, has taken place. While the plausibility of such an operation remains non-negligible at the time of this writing, it would lead either to a scenario which is either beyond the bounds of this study (the eradication of the nuclear program), or to a scenario which brings us back to the main hypothesis (a new, “crash” nuclear program).

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 territory would be twofold: a blackmail against one or several NATO countries involved in a military operation in the Middle East, that Tehran would seek to deter; and a conflict between Turkey and Iran following, for instance, a series of incidents in Kurdistan (more on Turkey's choices below).

A 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 the US nuclear strategic forces. They are complemented by the independent forces of France and the United Kingdom, as well as by some 200 so-called US non-strategic nuclear weapons permanently stationed in Europe. There has been of late a rejuvenation of the NATO nuclear debate – in particular through the proposition by several Northern and Central European countries that the United States withdraws the B-61 bombs from Europe, or at least from their territories. However, it seems unlikely that the Alliance will agree on a complete withdrawal of these weapons any time soon. Iran becoming a nuclear power would undoubtedly have an impact on NATO's own internal nuclear debate. A possible outcome of these deliberations would be for NATO's nuclear weapons to “move South”, that is, the weapons would be maintained in Italy and Turkey but withdrawn from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands (with some of the weapons withdrawn possibly transferred to other sites in Italy and Turkey which are currently in “caretaker” status).

What about missile defense? Current NATO missile defense programs aimed at the protection of Alliance territory are explicitly justified by the Iranian nuclear threat. While some governments currently debate the cost-effectiveness of such programs, the emergence an Iranian nuclear capability would probably lead to a more “sober” look at them.⁵ In case of a sudden acceleration of the Iranian program (overt or detected), NATO's deployments would certainly be considered – in light with the US policy of adapting the missile defense architecture in Europe 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.⁶ The choices that will be made in this regard will 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

⁵ Interview with a NATO official, May 2010.

⁶ The Soviet Union had – and Russia still maintains – a double layer of nuclear-tipped interceptors aimed at defending the Moscow region. The United States dismantled its single missile defense site in the 1970s.

stronger missile defense effort); (2) the Iranian nuclear declaratory policy (an overt, threatening posture would probably lead to increased public support to missile defense); (3) NATO member States policy orientations in terms of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, as well as the existence of options, if any, for bilateral non-strategic arms control with Russia (calling for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe is often made in the name of non-proliferation or in the hope that Moscow would reciprocate); (4) the assessed level of the non-nuclear ballistic missile threat from Iran and the Middle East in general (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).

If anything, the experience of the Cold war has taught us that even a clear and present danger such as the one that the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact presented 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 incite countries of the region to enhance their security in the face of what they would perceive as a significant, and in some cases existential, threat.

Some may choose the option to embark themselves in their own nuclear weapons program. Egypt, which benefits from US assistance but is hardly eligible for a security guarantee, should be regarded as a particular country of concern in this regard. It would require a far-reaching strategic decision – involving the probable loss of Western assistance. But it is the only State in the region which has both the security and prestige motivations *and* the indigenous technical know-how to go nuclear.⁷

The positions taken by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are very diverse.⁸ 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 – like Oman – approaches the question of external security guarantees with caution. 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).⁹ In addition, Saudi Arabia may have – though this is open to speculation – other options for reinforcing its security, including the modernization of its medium-range ballistic missiles, or establishing a nuclear partnership with Pakistan.¹⁰

⁷ An Egyptian nuclear capability may however be a distant prospect since the country does not have any known enrichment or reprocessing capability, and is not known to have conducted weaponization studies.

⁸ This section is partly based on interviews with NATO officials, May 2010.

⁹ Oman, which has good relations with Iran, has also refrained from adhering to the ICI.

¹⁰ Whether or not these Saudi options may have already been exercised is a topic of intense speculation on which there is very little, if any, publicly available credible information.

There are also potential second-order consequences for NATO. 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 that Algeria would let Egypt become the only Arab nuclear power. (The two countries do not benefit from an implicit security guarantee from the United States – and are hardly eligible for one. This makes the acquisition of a nuclear capability independent from the credibility of security assurances given by Western countries, contrary to the situation in the Gulf.¹¹)

The smaller Gulf monarchies (Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates) take a different outlook. 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 of the United Arab Emirates (like Jordan). All of them seem to be interested by increased consultations with the Alliance. From most accounts, Bahrain and Qatar are currently the most eager to deepen their relation with NATO.¹² 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.¹³

NATO should however not expect that the Gulf countries would consider the Alliance as 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 becoming nuclear.¹⁴ (The outcome of NATO’s operations in Afghanistan would also be a factor: the perception of a lack of resolve would also negatively affect the Gulf perception of allied commitments.) For some, “bandwagoning” with the new major power of the region may be an option preferable to alignment with “the West”. For others, a lingering suspicion that a US-Iran reconciliation or grand bargain would be possible almost at any time will continue to exist in the region. Furthermore, even though it varies from country to country among 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 in expanding and diversifying their security portfolio.

¹¹ The United States could threaten Egypt to cut off its military assistance to Cairo. Whether this would be enough to dissuade Egypt is difficult to assess.

¹² In 2009, the UAE signed a Security of Information agreement with NATO. A SOFA was expected to be signed in 2010.

¹³ Pierre Razoux, What future for NATO’s Istanbul Cooperation Initiative?, Research Paper n° 55, NATO Defence College, January 2010, p. 9.

¹⁴ There are already de facto US, UK and French security guarantees vis-à-vis Gulf countries, especially when forces are permanently deployed in the region (which is the case for the United States and France). Some bilateral agreements (e.g. the France/United Arab Emirates accord of 2008) reportedly include a de jure security commitment.

The Israel Question

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.

On Israel's side, a formal security guarantee has become less attractive since the country became a nuclear power.¹⁵ But Israelis on all sides of the political spectrum welcome US assistance, including the reaffirmation in a particularly strong manner of US support in case of aggression that took place during the Bush administration.¹⁶ Even though there is currently no expectation or demand for, the prospect for NATO membership would be welcomed by many as an additional layer of security.¹⁷ Some authors also point out that Israel's rapprochement with the Atlantic community would also bolster lever the country's value for the United States, as shown by the case of the United Kingdom.¹⁸ 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 shown by the case of France, shows that there is no incompatibility in principle here.

The most serious obstacles would come from non-US NATO members. Many would fear to become embroiled in Israel's disputes with its neighbors.¹⁹ And most of them would insist that the Palestinian question is solved before admitting Israel.²⁰ Israel

¹⁵ By the late 1960s, Ben Gurion had become convinced that no Western power would give the country a credible security guarantee. But he continued trying and specifically asked the Kennedy administration for a "bilateral security agreement", even musing with membership of NATO. But Washington only agreed to a general commitment to Israel's security and to an informal promise to support the country in case of an Arab surprise attack – whereas Tel-Aviv wanted a real defense treaty. Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 66, p. 122-123. Another study of the Israeli nuclear program suggests that "if the United States had agreed to guarantee Israel's existence through a defense pact (...), Ben-Gurion's determination to acquire the nuclear option might never have been aroused". Michael Karpin, *The Bomb in the Basement. How Israel Went Nuclear and What That Means for the World*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2007, p. 94.

¹⁶ "We will rise to Israel's defense, if need be. (...) You bet, we'll defend Israel". Quoted in Glenn Kessler, "Bush Says U.S. Would Defend Israel Militarily", *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2006. "I made it clear, I'll make it clear again, that we will use military might to protect our ally, Israel". President Discusses War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom, Cleveland, 20 March 2006.

¹⁷ According to two leading experts of the issue, "Israel does not anticipate, nor wish, NATO security guarantees, or the collective defense commitment embodied in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty". Tommy Steiner & Oded Eran, *NATO's New Strategic Concept and the Broader Middle East: A non-official Israeli Perspective and "Food for Thought"*, unpublished paper, April 2010, p. 10.

¹⁸ Uzi Arad, Oded Eran & Tommy Steiner, *Anchoring Israel to the Euro-Atlantic community: Further Upgrading and Institutionalizing NATO-Israel Relations*, Working paper, IDC Herzliya, January 2007.

¹⁹ Under current circumstances, Turkey would be likely to oppose any further upgrading of the NATO-Israel relationship.

²⁰ The question of whether or not Israel qualifies as a European State (a necessary condition for membership according to Article 10 of the Washington Treaty) might not be a serious obstacle: Turkey is a member of NATO and a prospective member of the European Union (EU) even though many on the continent dispute its European character – and increasingly its adhesion to "European" values. Note also that NATO itself takes liberties with commonsensical geography as it includes Mauritania and Jordan in its "Mediterranean" Dialogue. Finally, the

would not want to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear State (and thus give up its independent nuclear deterrent) as the price for admission, a price that some NATO members may ask for. Finally, a security guarantee “*requires clear and recognized borders to be defended, something Israel does not have today*”.²¹

As a second-best measure, a rapprochement between Israel and NATO would be in the cards. 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).²² Israel was the first MD 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.²³ 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 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 MD meeting at the ministerial level as long as Avigdor Lieberman holds the position of Israeli Foreign Minister.)

Only a profound change in the security equation of the region would change the perspective. 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.²⁴ 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 States will recognize its existence, but it might trade it for a NATO guarantee in case 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 a formal Israeli NATO membership. These two conditions have some level of interdependence themselves: a resolution of the Palestinian issue would go a long way to help Israel getting open Arab support for dealing with a nuclear-armed Iran.

The logical conclusion is that any serious further rapprochement between Israel and NATO, in particular with regard to the possibility of an Israeli NATO membership, seems primarily conditioned by progress on the Israeli-Palestinian side.

question of the geographical discontinuity would not be an important problem either: NATO did not have geographic continuity in Europe during the Cold war.

²¹ Ronald D. Asmus, “Contain Iran : Admit Israel to NATO”, The Washington Post, 21 February 2006.

²² Interviews with NATO officials, May 2010.

²³ This section is partly based on interviews with NATO officials, May 2010.

²⁴ At the 2010 NPT Review Conference (May 2010), States Parties agreed to the holding in 2012 of a conference devoted to the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East.

However, Israel perhaps could help persuading reluctant European countries to increase bilateral cooperation with NATO by marketing itself as a security *provider* – as opposed to most if not all MD and ICI countries, which are essentially security consumers. It participates in the NATO Active Endeavour maritime operation. It has first-class intelligence and analysis on the political and strategic developments in the region, which NATO could benefit from.²⁵ It has the most advanced and diversified missile defense program outside the United States. Furthermore, there would real advantage for NATO in participating to the reassurance of Israel. Decreasing the sense of isolation often felt in the country would make it more at ease to engage in peace talks. And it might help dissuading Tel-Aviv to reveal its nuclear capability (to bolster the credibility thereof and reassure its own population as Iran has become a nuclear power); for such a choice would considerably increase the domestic pressures in the Arab world for other governments to follow suit.

The Consequences for NATO Operations

Assuming that Iran will be encouraged to extend its power and influence in the region once it feels 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. 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. It 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).²⁶ But it is widely suspected that different agencies or 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 affect Iranian interests, then Tehran might be tempted to intervene militarily – something it was apparently close to do 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

²⁵ Among the signs of Israel’s willingness to establish a closer partnership with NATO is its adoption of the NATO Codification System (NCS), which became formal in 2010. Israel’s adoption, where possible, of NATO standards would be one of the avenues to promote NATO-Israel defense cooperation.

²⁶ A high-level meeting between NATO and Iran devoted to counter-narcotics took place in January 2009.

slight – possibility that NATO might be called upon to help supporting a peace deal in the region. (Iran’s new status could incite it to increase its support for Hamas and presence in Gaza – thus making a peace settlement even more complex to achieve.)

The Alliance has put 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 force needed for a peace support operation in the Near East are often within the range 20,000-30,000.²⁷ An in-depth study of the issue 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.²⁸ It also concludes that “NATO is not currently ready to take on this kind of mission, and might never be”.²⁹

At the same time, the very existence of an Iranian nuclear capability might be a strong disincentive for some NATO countries to participate – at least 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 truer if other countries of the region (Syria) 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 discourage 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. Not all Turks realize that “a nuclear-armed Iran could prove a fundamentally different regional actor from the Turkish perspective” and that it “will spell trouble for Turkish security and undermine political objectives across multiple regions”.³⁰ There are three broad scenarios here.

The first one 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 policy of “good neighborhood”, 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 the ties with Europe and the United States would lead to the demand of a withdrawal of US forces (including nuclear) from Turkish territory. Ankara then might consider its own nuclear military option.³¹

²⁷ Informal discussions with high-level European military officials, April 2010.

²⁸ Some leading Israeli military experts consider that these numbers are too high and are based on exceedingly worse-case analysis. Informal conversations with Israeli experts, French-Israeli Strategic Dialogue, Caesarea, July 2010.

²⁹ Florence Gaub, NATO: peacekeeping in the Holy Land? A feasibility study, Research Paper n° 57, NATO Defence College, March 2010, p. 2.

³⁰ Ian O. Lesser, Can Turkey Live with a Nuclear Iran?, On Turkey Analysis, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2 March 2009, p. 2, p. 4.

³¹ See Ian O. Lesser, « Turkey, Iran, and Nuclear Risks », in Henry Sokolski & Patrick Clawson (ed.), Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran, Carlisle, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, October 2005, p. 106. In June 2010, a Turkish analyst summarized the driving principles of Ankara’s policy vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear crisis as

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 which would be seen as closing the door to Ankara’s membership in the EU. In such circumstances – as seen in other countries such as Pakistan – an independent nuclear program controlled by the armed forces would be a way to ensure their grip on power.

The third scenario would see also a return to a stronger influence of the secular forces (and possibly of the military), but without any major irritants in its 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 US nuclear weapons on the Inçirlik air base, which would considerably grow in relative importance for NATO’s deterrence given its proximity with 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? Would not the question of 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 lowering of EU appetite for Ankara’s membership, and growing support in Turkey for a nuclear-armed Iran, makes these two scenarios credible, though certainly not probable at this point.³²

Conclusions and Recommendations

Solving issue not only an interest for the United States, Europe, and their friends and allies (to say nothing of the non-proliferation regime), but also a major interest for NATO per se.

At this point in time, it would probably not be appropriate for NATO to seek having its own “Iran policy”. Perceptions of Iran and interests vis-à-vis Tehran differ too much

follows: “ (...) *the non-proliferation system has failed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. It has instead allowed the major world powers to sometimes permit and at other times fail to deter countries from developing their own arsenals. The regime gives a monopoly of nuclear weapons to those that already have them, placing them at a permanent advantage without a meaningful program of total nuclear disarmament. It is therefore not justified to expect countries to observe a set of rules that were developed without their participation or give their consent to an arrangement that accords undue privileges to a select group of countries. This is all the more important since the possession of nuclear weapons provides a country with a shield that protects it against conventional attacks by other powers.*” Should this represent an accurate picture, it would be a worrying development, potentially laying the political groundwork for a future Turkish military option. Ilter Turan, Turkey’s Iran Policy: Moving Away From Tradition?, On Turkey Analysis, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 25 June 2010, p. 3.

³² In 2009, 35% thought that NATO was essential to Turkey’s security, 22% had a favorable image of the United States (32% of the European Union), and 29% would accept the existence of a nuclear-armed Iran. Transatlantic Trends – Key Findings 2009, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2009, pp. 24-26.

throughout the Alliance.³³ And visibly putting Iran on NATO's agenda might comfort the hard-liners' rhetoric that "the West is after us". However, should Iran be seen as crossing the nuclear threshold, the stakes for NATO as well as the interaction between them would make such an integrated approach indispensable.

The Alliance would have little choice but follow a "triple-track policy" of containment, deterrence, and reassurance: containment to ensure that the political and strategic fallout of Tehran's acquisition of nuclear status will remain limited³⁴; deterrence to counter any attempt by Iran to directly threaten NATO interests; reassurance to avoid friends and allies to embark themselves in their own nuclear programs (as well as ensuring that other perceived risks and threats would not be neglected³⁵).

The strategy followed vis-à-vis non-allied 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 or destabilization of Gulf countries would entail the highest risks for the Iranian regime.

This would mean, in particular, 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 which neighbor Iran – in case of a threat to the peace and security of the region.³⁶ A possible model would be Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. The Alliance could also use the expression of the 1991 so-called Copenhagen Declaration.³⁷ The security of friendly countries in the Middle East would be declared as being "*of direct and material concern*" to the NATO.³⁸ This should be made clear in particular for countries offering concrete support and participation in NATO-led operations, such as the United Arab Emirates, which would be encouraged to sign a SOFA agreement.

Increased security commitments toward Arab states would make it politically easier for NATO to simultaneously upgrade its relationship with Israel. The Alliance would also seek additional participation for Israeli operation 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.

³³ Claiming that "*Putting Iran on NATO's political agenda would improve policy coordination among Allies, particularly with regard to Turkey and the US*" and that "*NATO involvement could facilitate a gradual normalization of the bilateral relations between Washington and Tehran*" would be qualified by some as wishful thinking. NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Iran – Making a Case for NATO's Political Engagement, Mike Ross (rapporteur), Report 166 PCTR 08 E bis, 2008.

³⁴ A strategy of containment could be based on the broadening of the mandate and geographical scope of operations Open Shield (Horn of Africa) and Active Endeavour (Mediterranean Sea).

³⁵ For instance, a strong focus on Iran might be perceived by Poland and the Baltic States as a distraction from a perceived potential "Russian threat".

³⁶ As an expert noted, "*the States within the region have to understand what NATO would do in the event of their being attacked*". "NATO and Gulf Security", Seminar Report, NATO Defence College, December 2009.

³⁷ Statement issued by the North Atlantic Council Meeting in Ministerial Session in Copenhagen, 6-7 June 1991.

³⁸ 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 which are parties to the various Alliance partnership programs (the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative).

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, in particular, 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 (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 a new, unpredictable dynamics of conflict at its borders.³⁹

Faced with a nuclear-armed Iran, NATO's deterrence policy might have to undergo significant changes in order for Iran to clearly understand that there is an Alliance-wide consensus that nuclear blackmail by Tehran will not be tolerated. Real-world nuclear crises 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 States, but also anywhere in the region; this to take into account the possibility – however remote – that a faction in the regime might be willing and able to deliberately 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, for instance, a complete withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from European territory.⁴⁰

Alliance member States should be aware that Middle East countries in the region are watching NATO's endurance in Afghanistan very closely. Should NATO appears 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 or not 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 of the NATO-Russia relationship would be the silver lining in the consequences for the Alliance of the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran.⁴¹ This does not make the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran any rosier for NATO.

³⁹ Lesser, *Can Turkey Live with a Nuclear Iran?*, op. cit., p. 4.

⁴⁰ Dual-capable aircraft can still be maintained for several years without being replaced. B-61 bombs can remain operational for the rest of the decade.

⁴¹ This is by no means a certain outcome. A renewed focus by NATO on nuclear deterrence and missile defense to deter a nuclear-armed Iran could equally make Russia uncomfortable.

Nato and a Nuclear Iran

Workshop Summary

15 October 2010

On October 7, 2010, The Fondation pour la recherche stratégique convened a day-long workshop in Paris to discuss the consequences for NATO of a nuclear-armed Iran, with support from the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The workshop involved around twenty experts from Alliance and non-Alliance countries, NATO officials, and French officials. What follows is a brief summary of the debate, focusing on the main ideas developed by the participants.

Iran is the “elephant in the room” in many NATO debates. There is no formal allied “Iran policy”, and political sensitivities have precluded NATO bodies to tackle the topic of Iran as such. However, the Iranian question looms large over the nuclear and missile defense debates, involvement in Afghanistan, as well as on the questions of relations with non-member countries in the Mediterranean region and the Gulf.

The consequences for NATO of a nuclear-armed Iran would be scenario dependent. Political and military implications of an opaque nuclear capability would be different from an overt, demonstrated and provocative one. Timelines matter: the implications of the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran by 2020 would not be the same as those of a nuclear-armed Iran as early as 2012. There would be differences in terms of consequences for the security of Western troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, or in terms of military technologies (missile defense, long-range conventional weapons) to deter and defend against it.

In all scenarios, such consequences would be multifaceted – touching upon most dimension of common Alliance activities – and also interdependent – metaphors such as a “mobile” or a “Rubik’s cube” were suggested.

The fact that the international community will have been – by definition in such a scenario – unable to stop Iran from becoming nuclear will have important negative consequences for the perception of the value of Western security guarantees and for the credibility of NATO deterrence.

For NATO, deterrence and protection vis-à-vis a nuclear-armed Iran would require an appropriate combination of nuclear weapons, missile defense and conventional precision arms. Where to place the “cursor” would depend on the perception of the Iranian threat and on the cost-effectiveness of these various means. Also, the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran might alter the trade-off between the need to emphasize nuclear deterrence and the push for nuclear disarmament by some NATO countries.

Command and control as well as rules of engagement for territorial missile defense is a very sensitive issue from a political point of view. European countries may not want to

pre-delegate to a US commander the ability to intercept an Iranian missile aimed at Europe.

The possible “silver lining” of the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran would be that such a situation may be an opportunity for strengthening cooperation with Russia, including on missile defense. However, the change in Iran’s status will not necessarily result in such an outcome. Russia’s stated discomfort with regard to US missile defense and long-range conventional weapons might be an obstacle. Also, Iranian influence in the South Caucasus will be an important factor in defining Russian attitudes.

Would a new focus on Iran by NATO create unease among Eastern European members of the Alliance, who might fear that it would detract allies from focusing on Russia? Not necessarily. This question should not be seen as zero-sum game: NATO may have the political and military ability to face, if necessary, two different potential nuclear-armed adversaries, Russia and Iran.

The feasibility and desirability of new security guarantees to Gulf countries is open to question. It is dubious that the United States would be ready to “trade Chicago for Riyadh”. On the recipients’ side, the trust in Western protection might be weakened by the mere fact that, by definition, we were unable to stop Iran. In any case, political and cultural preferences in the region make it dubious that an explicit nuclear umbrella would be an appropriate option (even though some leaders of the region sometimes muse with the idea of dual-key arrangements). Ambiguity regarding the nuclear nature of Western security commitments in the region might be the optimal solution for all actors.

Gulf countries would not reject an increased security commitment by US and NATO members. But they will likely “hedge their bets” through forging closer ties with Iran, or through pursuing a nuclear option. Their reaction will also depend on the way Iran plays the nuclear card.

This is not to say that NATO would have no role to play in the security of the Gulf under the shadow of an Iranian nuclear capability. Western countries will remain the only credible global military actor in the eyes of Gulf countries. While the NATO “label” might not have as much value in this region as it has in other parts of the world, the Alliance’s multinational character may bring additional legitimacy, in the eyes of local elites, to US military involvement. NATO maritime forces would certainly be called upon to contribute to the protection of straits and the free passage of merchant ships, as well as counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation activities.

Perhaps NATO could help GCC countries enhance their multilateral security cooperation. However, the natural trend for Gulf countries is to favor bilateral arrangements. And it is possible that a nuclear-armed Iran would induce a profound split in Gulf solidarity. It is dubious that the ICI could be used as an instrument for containing Iran.

It is sometimes suggested that the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran would compel Israel to solve the Palestinian issue in order to be able to focus on what would perhaps be an existential threat for the Jewish State. Whatever the merits of this proposition, a nuclear-armed Iran would also make a NATO operation in support of a peace accord

more difficult: consensus would be harder to reach, and participation would be harder to get.

That said, the mere suggestion of a massive NATO involvement in Afghanistan would have been laughed before 2001. We should thus refrain from calling the very hypothesis of a NATO operation in support of a peace accord as being farfetched. Besides, some other forms of allied involvement in the same region – for instance to support a peace plan between Syria and Israel – might not be as problematic.

Even assuming that a peace accord with the Palestinians might make it easier for Alliance members to consider the adhesion of Israel to NATO, important obstacles would remain for such a hypothesis to materialize. Would adhesion be open to a State whose “European” identity might be questioned? Would Alliance countries accept a non-signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty endowed with a nuclear capability (which it would not want to give up in the face of a nuclear Iran)? And would Israel be at all interested in such membership (given that it has never sought formal, treaty-based alliances)? The optimum solution for NATO and Israel might be for the latter to be enshrined in a broader, informal regional security architecture.

In any case, the need for NATO to clarify its partnerships with non-member countries is widely recognized. Article 4 of the Washington Treaty – arguably a form of security guarantee in itself – is often touted as a possible model in this regard. However, one may wonder what the value of Article 4 is without an Article 5 to follow it. Lessons from the Georgian crisis of 2008 should be drawn in order to fine-tune the language used by NATO vis-à-vis its partners, in order to avoid misunderstandings both by friends and potential enemies.

An Iranian nuclear capability would not fundamentally alter Iran’s interests, but might very well change the way Tehran defends them. Here, again, timeline and scenarios matters. The consequences for NATO would not be the same if there were still Western forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Iran’s nuclear capability might make it more able to cope with a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, which could become a battlefield for Iranian-Saudi/Pakistani competition.

An Iraq which feels abandoned by the West and increasingly subjugated to Tehran’s influence might be tempted to reconstitute a nuclear capability (although in a couple of decades, its expertise in this field will probably have disappeared).

There might be a discrepancy between Ankara’s current diplomacy vis-à-vis Iran and Turkish long-term security interests. A nuclear-armed Iran would probably not be seen as a benign scenario in Turkey. In that country, the “NATO label” helps, especially given the evolution of bilateral US-Turkish relations since the early 2000s. The probability that Ankara would be tempted by a national nuclear program remains low in all scenarios. Turkey needs reassurance from its partners, but whether the presence of US B-61 nuclear bombs in Inçirlik is the key to such an assurance remains a debated question: this presence is judged important by many in the establishment, but the current government does not seem to give it a lot of importance.

Anchoring Turkey even deeper in the transatlantic defense system could be achieved through missile defense. Ankara’s likely conditions for full participation in a common system, possibly including a radar on its own territory, reflect the complexity of the

relations with its allies and friends: it will insist on full coverage of its territory, but also on the “neutral” character of NATO missile defense, which should not be presented as geared towards Iran.

Workshop Agenda and Participants' List

WORKSHOP ON A NUCLEAR IRAN: CONSEQUENCES FOR NATO

6-7 October 2010

Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, 27 rue Damesme, Paris, France

FINAL AGENDA

6 October

2030-2230 Informal dinner for speakers and organizers (Chez Nathalie, 45 rue Vandrezanne)

7 October

0900-0930 A Nuclear Iran: Overview and Scenarios

- Bruno Tertrais, Foundation for Strategic Research

0930-1030 A Nuclear Iran: Article 5, Deterrence and Missile Defense

- Robert Nurick, Independent consultant
- Emanuele Ottolenghi, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies

1030-1045 Coffee Break

1045-1145 A Nuclear Iran: Israel, NATO and the Peace Process

- Tommy Steiner, IDC Herzliya
- Florence Gaub, NATO Defense College

1145-1245 A Nuclear Iran: Afghanistan and Iraq

- François Heisbourg, Foundation for Strategic Research
- Fabrice Pothier, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

1245-1400 Informal lunch (on site)

1400-1500 A Nuclear Iran: The Gulf States and NATO

- Pierre Razoux, NATO Defense College
- Emile Hokayem, International Institute for Strategic Studies

1500-1600 A Nuclear Iran: Turkey's Choices

- Ian Lesser, German Marshall Fund of the United States
- Mustafa Kibaroglu, Bilkent University

1600-1630 Conclusions

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FINAL LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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