



Title: Iran and the Bomb: The Abdication of International Responsibility

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The international community has received Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons with great concern since it perceives that such acquisition will lead to dangerous instability in the Gulf region and beyond. There is concern that some countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey may be tempted to match Iran at least by acquiring similar nuclear fuel production technologies, while other powers may be tempted to strike militarily at Iran.

Thérèse Delpech argues that the chances of stopping Iran in its race to acquire the nuclear bomb through diplomacy are slim: too many opportunities have been missed and too much time has been lost. To make things worse, the leader who emerged from the Iranian presidential elections in 2005 – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – is an ultra-conservative, former member of the Iranian secret service who does not consider compromise an option. After he took office began a period of deliberate confrontation, which was not envisaged by the Europeans, the Americans or a large majority of Iranians themselves. Yet, Delpech notes that this confrontation does not exclude discussion. If Iran can combine the acquisition of the bomb and lengthy talks with the Europeans, Russians or Chinese with impunity on the international stage, this will naturally be its preferred option.

One of the key messages of this book is that if the international community has proved powerless, respective powers should acknowledge their responsibility: the Europeans have always reacted too little and too late, the Americans have not defined a clear policy on Iran, the Russians have constantly sat on the fence, and the Chinese have hidden behind the Russians. There will be a price to pay for tolerating the dubious role played by a country such as Pakistan, which only marginally assisted in the International Atomic Agency (IAEA) investigation for fear that new evidence might come to light concerning its own proliferation activities, or South Africa, whose policy on Iran is hard to fathom. Delpech clarifies the role of these countries in their dealings with Iran.

To grasp the nature of this crisis, it is necessary to have a sound understanding of what the Iranian government *wants* to achieve through its nuclear program. Tehran has continually claimed, especially since the election of the new president, that Iran wants to develop its own nuclear fuel cycle for civilian purposes. It claims that there is no reason to deprive Iran of its 'inalienable' right to benefit from nuclear energy for peaceful purposes guaranteed by article 4 of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Delpech argues however that this is an abusive interpretation of the NPT, which guarantees neither enrichment nor reprocessing, but only the right to use nuclear energy for 'peaceful purposes'. Furthermore, this right is dependent on countries fulfilling their non-proliferation obligations. She reminds the reader that Iran's abundant oil and gas resources are so massive that developing nuclear energy does not make much sense from an economic point of view. It is significant that this 'peaceful' program was shrouded in great secrecy for nearly 20 years (1985-2002), and was only discovered by the Iranian opposition in exile. On these grounds, in the 1990s a number of observers of Iran's ballistic missile program concluded that Iran simply wants the bomb. The author agrees that the quest for an atomic weapon is the only credible explanation for the secrecy that surrounded the program, the involvement of the military, the multiple purchases and attempted purchases traced around the world, and Iran's many lies, ploys and stalling tactics.

In terms of political gains, a first objective for Iran is to guarantee the support of non-aligned countries by insisting on the 'inalienable' right of the NPT signatories to benefit from nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Iran's insistence on the 'right' to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is a winning ploy in a general climate where there is strong support for the theory that the northern countries have chosen to develop nuclear technology to maintain their domination over the south. Still, this rhetoric has its limits as some Arab Gulf states – Saudi Arabia first and foremost – do not want Iran to have a nuclear bomb. The second prong of Iran's political strategy consists of neutralizing the Arab countries, which also fear an Iranian nuclear bomb, by continually evoking the Israeli nuclear threat and reinforcing the Arab populations' hostility towards Israel.

Delpech insists nonetheless that Israel is not the reason why Tehran wants to acquire the nuclear bomb. The key dates when decisions were made, i.e., the 1970s under the Shah, who had good relations with Israel, and then 1985 during the war with Iraq, suggest that there was a different agenda. In the 1970s, it was the desire for regional domination, and in the 1990s, the wish to acquire a decisive response to Saddam Hussein's lethal chemical weapons attacks on Iranian troops that had been going on since 1983. Although Israel is not the reason for Iran's nuclear program, it provides Iran with an excellent justification to give its neighbors. The Israeli nuclear arsenal being moreover a permanent source of frustration in the Arab world, renders it an easy way of countering the Arab capitals' objections.

Considering the role of the external parties, Delpech suggests that the Europeans became involved in the Iranian case for three main reasons: they wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to achieve progress on non-proliferation by taking the diplomatic route; they sought to restore the unity they had lost during the Iraq crisis; and they themselves felt threatened by Iran's ballistic missile program, given its existing and planned capability. Iran's alleged links with terrorism is yet another factor.

By May 2006, US policy on Iran was not clearly formulated. Only at the very end of the month did Washington declare its readiness to negotiate with Tehran should Iran comply with the Security Council's demands. However, if the threat is perceived as very real, intervention, never discounted as a possibility, might well ensue to put an end to Iran's nuclear ambitions. Surely, the argument against attacking Iran remains persuasive. Washington's perception of the Iranian question is largely determined by its perception of the Iraqi question. The Iranian agents present in Iraq have a real capacity to cause damage. Even so, Delpech suggests that it would be a mistake to conclude that Washington will necessarily be weak in dealing with Tehran because of Iraq: the Iranian nuclear threat is too important for the US to ignore it. An Iranian nuclear bomb could well cost a lot more than a military operation by calling into question not only America's entire 'Greater Middle Eastern' policy, but also its deterrent capability in the region.

Russia is a key player in the Iran affair. Arms trade relations between the two countries have built up over the last 15 years. Iran notably bought Russian MiG and Sukhoi combat aircraft, T72 tanks, Kilo class diesel submarines, and surface-to-air missile systems. A number of Russian institutions and some research centers entered into all kinds of partnership arrangements without being investigated in the field of nuclear and ballistic weapons. Moscow may be guilty of other dealings that have not come to light and might even make Russia vulnerable to blackmail by Iran. Whereas Moscow recognizes the Iranian threat, it is maintaining an ambiguous public stance on the issue.

The author observes that over the last few decades China has forged close links with Iran and its cooperation with Tehran has increased considerably since the 1980s thanks to China's insatiable energy needs and Iran's appetite for weapons and consumer goods. There is also a military aspect to this partnership, with the Islamic Republic gaining increasing access to the technologies and weapons developed and used by the People's Liberation Army. There are further reasons for an Iranian-Chinese alliance: the hostility of both countries towards the United States, the need for Iran to preserve an 'oriental alternative' to rapprochement with the west, and the role model that China represents for Tehran. Nuclear cooperation with China is one of the most significant alliances Iran has established, alongside those with Russia and Pakistan. So far, Beijing's support for Tehran has been unwavering, but this does not mean that China is prepared to encourage any form of Iranian venture. Beijing's interest is rather for the negotiations to drag on indefinitely, without any decision being reached as to whether to act at the Security Council.

Delpech notes that ambiguity surrounds relations between Iran, on the one hand, and Pakistan and India, on the other. At different periods, exchanges of sensitive equipment, including nuclear-related technology, took place between Iran and Pakistan, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. In the mid-1990s, Abdul Qadeer Khan's clandestine network supplied Iran with blueprints for first-generation P1 centrifuges and second-generation P2 centrifuges. New Delhi too has maintained an ambiguous attitude towards Iran's nuclear case which can be explained in three different ways. There are no disputes between India and Iran. New Delhi is keen to preserve these relations for strategic reasons, because of the help it has received – so far – from Iran in Afghanistan. There is also an energy motive, since India – given the size of its population and its rapidly growing economy – is heavily dependent on Iranian oil and gas.

This book offers an in-depth account of foreign powers' reaction to the Iranian nuclear program. Written by a leading expert on international nuclear security it will surely be welcomed by academics and policy makers alike.