

Issue Brief

July 2025

No : 443

Addressing Iran's
Nuclear Program:
Options for USA

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey,
PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)



Addressing Iran's Nuclear Program: Options for USA

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey,
PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

**The paper was written by the author, as a Colonel, on 02 May 2008, while attending the master's Program in "Grand Strategy, Formulation of National and Foreign Policy" at National Defense University, Washington DC in 2007-08.*

Abstract

Iran, while continuing to pursue the nuclear ambition of 1970s with a single-minded focus without realizing the changing world paradigms, has tried to obfuscate and delay decisions on the nuclear talks initiated by different world bodies. The strategic community, while attempting to break the deadlock through talks, must also explore other options. Sometimes a hard decision, of force, becomes inexpedient for the larger strategic objective of ensuring peace, howsoever frayed it is in a volatile region such as the Middle East. There are three broad options to encourage a change in the strategic direction of Iran Significant carrot and sticks; reconcile to coexist with nuclear Iran that can be encouraged to remain peaceful and not strident; or carry out military strikes disabling nuclear ambition, changing the regime and engaging in talks thereafter.

Keywords: Nuclear program, Multilateral talks, Military strikes

During the first decade of the 21st century, a major challenge and block had emerged in the strategic environment of the USA with respect to breaking the imbroglio with Iran on its single-minded focus to enrich Uranium for nuclear weapon capability. While public and official stated purpose was always 'peaceful use of nuclear program for renewable energy', even though Iran was an oil rich country, the covert, not so secret mission, intent was to acquire a nuclear bomb—Islamic bomb, with a view to leverage the region in particular and the world at large, as also to emerge as a superior Islamic Nation. However, an often stated political and religious mission—"Death to America and Death to Israel", made issues very complicated.

Nuclear proliferation in the Middle East/ West Asia was a terrible idea, given the complexities, proxy warriors, teaming terror groups and of course extreme mistrust between countries. It was a

tinder box waiting to self-burn in case Iran— a Shia state in the Sunni region, had acquired that capability. Saudi Arabia and others had already stated on record that, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, they would surely acquire one. Subtle intelligence leaks, at that time, of Israel already possessing the nuclear weapon capability, made matters worse thus hardening the stance of its arch rival viz. Iran, towards acquiring the nukes.

This paper was originally written in May 2008, while pursuing a Master's Program on "Grand Strategy, Formulation of National and Foreign Policy" in National War College of National Defense University, Washington DC, USA. It was written voluntarily, to provide an outsider's perspective and give options to the USA lawmakers, if found appropriate, to deal with Iran's ambition for the nuclear program that would have surely set an already troubled region into a competitive race for acquiring safeguards in the form of nuclear weapons.

Strangely, even after 17 years, in 2025, the subject remains unresolved and a hot topic for debate. This contentious issue could have been resolved if some sagacity was found in the leaderships of Iran, Israel, USA and other regional powers. This would have avoided plunging of the entire region into an avoidable turmoil when Israel launched 'Operation Rising Lion' on 13 June 2025— when a large number of prominent top military commanders and scientists of Iran were assassinated. They did not even know when and from where the strikes came.

Strangely, in the gap period of 17 years since the paper was written, the geopolitical world and complexities have remained unchanged with an exception of the rise of China. The most important regional leadership of the time have come together coincidentally— as the Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, then the opposition leader and an extremely hardline politician who took over as the Prime Minister second time in February 2009 and remained till 2021. He again became the Prime Minister in 2022 and remains till date. On the other hand, in Iran, Ali Khamenei continues to be the Supreme Leader since 1989. Hence, two hardline leaders have ensured that the issue remained unresolved.

The paper, had considered three options at that time and recommended the third— 'Military Strikes followed by offer of Bilateral/Multilateral Negotiations'. May seem coincidence, but the

cost of this option, in an earlier time frame, would have allowed for lesser ramifications. However, one can also consider that the geopolitical environment could not have been more suitable to exercise this option as all other options recommended had finally been exhausted. USA joined the conflict on 22 June 2025, when the B2 Spirit Bombers (the world famed stealth bombers) along with sea launched Tomahawk missiles participated in a bombing mission dispensing number of GBU 57 MOP (Massive Ordnance Penetrator) knocking out Natanz, Esfahan and more importantly Fordow nuclear sites of Iran, flying directly from Missouri (USA) for more than 35 hours and returning back.

The first part of the recommended option — Military Strikes, have been executed from 13 June to 24 June 2025 as part of "Operation Lion Rise" by Israel and the "Operation Midnight Hammer" on 22 June 2025 by the US forces, destroying partially and disabling, for the meantime, the nuclear ambition of Iran for few more years. The stage is set for the second part, post ceasefire on 24 June 2025, for talks, preferably bilateral or if required multilateral, to dissuade Iran from pursuing the nuclear ambition in view of the changed world geopolitical realities. Conciliatory messaging, already ongoing by USA, to threatening signaling of more comprehensive and destructive strikes should remain on table for consideration, if peaceful talks are not undertaken by Iran. An attempt for regime change should remain par for the course, in case of unrelenting Iran. The choices are limited with Iran, as the entire region, including the Islamic world watches silently, because past decade actions of Iran has surely distanced and isolated itself. There is very little assistance coming especially with Netanyahu focused on complete destruction.

Issue: How to Address Iran's Nuclear Program

Background

In order to frame various options for addressing the subject of Iran's nuclear program, it is imperative that US strategists recapitulate important issues that may have led to the current impasse. The mutual confrontationist policies of the US and Iran, during the last five decades, has been shaped by three events. *First*, in 1953, CIA orchestrated a coup in Iran that overthrew the first democratic government in the Middle East. *Second*, during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Mullahs toppled the US favoured Shah. It resulted in the famed hostage crisis, loss of American lives and toppling of two US Presidents in related incidents. *Lastly*, in 1980s Iran-Iraq war, the US

supported Iraq overtly. Iraqis killed nearly 50,000 Iranian soldiers by using chemical weapons and no country or institution in the world condemned the act. In my opinion, US policies towards Iran have continued to be shaped by the 1979 events. Iran has also made reconciliation difficult by taking anti-US position in all international issues.

There are nine facts that merit consideration. *One*, Iran has nursed a regional hegemonic aspiration due to its size, oil/gas reserves and Persian nationalistic pride but feels threatened due to increased presence of arch protagonist, the US, in the region. *Two*, Iran's security concerns are genuine as it is outnumbered, outgunned and hemmed in by nuclear states of Pakistan, Israel and the US. *Three*, Iran does not have nuclear weapon. *Four*, the IAEA inspectors had found traces of highly enriched uranium at the sites discovered in 2002 confirming that a covert nuclear weapons program was in progress in gross contravention of NPT signed by Iran. *Five*, proliferation of WMD in Iran will profoundly challenge the US national security interests in the region. *Six*, intensive diplomatic efforts of the EU-3 and three sets of UN sanctions in recent years have not changed the behaviour of Iran and it continues to deny access to IAEA to certain identified nuclear facilities. Iran has learned lessons from OSIRAQ and has spread out its nuclear facilities. It continues to procure and develop nuclear weapon delivery capability. *Seven*, Former President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other leaders have publicly claimed their intent to annihilate Israel. *Eight*, to alter behaviour of Iran—targets of all strategic communications should be the real power centre i.e. the Supreme Leader, Mullahs, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the emerging middle class aspiring for a better life. *Nine*, the human rights condition in Iran is despicable especially for women. There is a simmering discontent among the population due to current economic conditions that has fuelled a desire for more freedom and rights.

The exact status of Iran's nuclear weapon program is not known. Owing to the unclear status of the current power structure, it is difficult to predict Iranian response to any engagement due to a high degree of power interplay between the Supreme Leader, Mullahs and IRGC. The status of IRGC is not known except that it lacks experience, is corrupt, morally/materially weak and may collapse.

Assumptions

- Nuclear deterrence, in the perception of Iranian strategists, is the only key to secure national interests and overcome the asymmetry of conventional forces.
- Iran is exploiting the global inertia to act against it due to the impending change at the White House, overstretched US military and relative isolation of the US to continue with nuclear weapons program.
- Iran is NPT signatory and continues to claim a peaceful nuclear program for domestic energy needs but has refused access to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to all its nuclear facilities— an indication of a covert nuclear program.
- Iran's nuclear weapon status will destabilise the region and may also start a nuclear arms race.
- Russia, France, China and traditional nuclear facilitators can influence Iran to reverse program. Their current anti-Iran attitudes are indicator of feasibility of multilateral diplomatic effort for sanctions.
- Iran's nuclear weapons/fissile material will reach terrorists with/without state support.
- Intense outside engagement, positive or negative, may encourage the restive population to change the behavior of the regime or cause an implosion.

Objectives

- Fortify long term US national security interests in the Middle East by ensuring stability in the region.
- Block the nuclear weapons program of Iran and prevent nuclear arms race in the volatile region.
- Transform the behaviour of Iran by creating a security environment to make nuclear ambition prohibitive.
- Create conditions to encourage Iranians to change the current leadership or reverse its anti-US stance.
- Demonstrate resolve of firm US commitment towards a collective global security/stability to allies/friends and deter states with nuclear capability from proliferating WMD technology.

Option 1: Strategy of Significant Carrot and Sticks

This option entails rallying of a multilateral/bilateral effort to offer significant economic and technological assistance to stop nuclear weapons program along with a timeline including offers for direct US-Iran negotiations that will unsettle Iranian leadership. It should be coupled with a series of hard multilateral sanctions targeting its oil/gas export to force a realistic cost-benefit analysis. The offer should include multilateral and US led security assurances, thus making nuclear ambition irrelevant and prohibitive. Follow it with a massive public information campaign targeting Iranians with high profile visits and claims of world leaders. It will encourage the people to reshape the thinking of the regime.

Pros

Multilateralism is the latest Mantra. Russia, France and China are amenable to this option. Cost-benefit analysis may force the hand of Iranian regime to change its stance. It will also align the global forces against Iran if there is no change. This option achieves all the objectives. Military strike option continues to be on table for the next President, if required.

Cons

Worldwide support for hard sanctions may be difficult due to the present oil crisis. It may exacerbate the current energy crisis leading to unintended consequences in the third world, thus making it difficult to execute sanctions. Iran can stall and continue to exploit the interim period till next administration becomes effective to reach the 'point of no return'. Most importantly sanctions need time to be effective, if at all, and only affect the masses giving rise to nationalism. Window of opportunity will be lost.

Option 2: Prepare to coexist with nuclear Iran and apply all tools to engage, primarily by bilateral/multilateral negotiations, to change its current anti-US stance.

This option is based on the premise that contextual constraints preclude credible intervention to deny nuclear weapon capability to Iran. It is in the US interest to contain Iran positively, by application of strategy of reconciliation and bilateral engagement. I state this option, as a foreigner, based on my understanding of history and interplay between the US and Iran in last three decades. However, it is important to execute this strategy based upon maturity, dignity,

respect, and recognition. Threat should be off the table as long as possible. Towards this end, all instruments of statecraft, other than military, should be employed to target the entire spectrum of hierarchy including the people. In the interim, the US should negotiate with Iran to reverse its nuclear ambitions with reconciliation, economic aid, and nuclear energy assistance offer. Diplomacy and information should be used to align all multilateral forces to convince Iran. If all efforts fail and Iran achieves nuclear weapon status, the transition of US policy will be smooth to facilitate Iran in becoming a responsible nuclear power. However, the other states in the region should be promised the US security umbrella to avoid a nuclear arms race.

Pros

It is imperative to revise strategy in face of failed UN sanctions and engage Iran constructively. It is possible that Iran may give up ambition for nuclear weapon in its long term interests or may not be able to achieve technological success. However, if Iran becomes a nuclear state, then it would be essential to engage and build a positive relationship, in order to change its behaviour towards the US. Iran is likely to act responsibly if engaged. Stability in the region is feasible if other states recognise US influence on Iran. The entire security situation is likely to change in the region. It prepares the US policy environment to avoid strategic surprise and cater for worst case scenarios. Has high possibility of meeting national security interests of the US. A secure Iran will reconcile its rhetoric towards Israel and US.

Cons

The radicals in Iran may never reconcile. Nuclear Iran may become belligerent and use its capability to blackmail. In due course, though unlikely, there maybe attempts to destroy Israel by nuclear strike. Israel may take a unilateral action and aim at destroying the facilities before the 'point of no return' is achieved. With or without state support nuclear weapon or fissile material may be leaked out to terrorists.

Option 3: Military Strikes Followed by Offer of Bilateral/Multilateral Negotiations

In this option, I recommend carrying out of Military Strikes, primarily air and sabotage, on key/all nuclear facilities in November/December of 2008 and follow it up with offers of bilateral/multilateral negotiation by the new President in January 2009. This option intends to

inflict maximum strategic surprise on Iran. Iranian leadership is likely to be paralysed as neither the military action will be expected in end 2008 nor an offer of bilateral peaceful negotiation from the US. Intention is neither to achieve total destruction of nuclear weapons program nor force a regime change. These may happen by default. The strategy aims to delay the nuclear weapons program and utilise the increased window of opportunity to stop it eventually. Strike should be multilateral with overt exclusion of Israel. Bilateral/multilateral negotiations with economic centric tools can be applied by the next President after publicly distancing from the military strikes by the previous administration. This action will result in worldwide condemnation of the administration that is known for its offensive strikes. The issue will be live for few days and provide the next administration to start with a positive image with whom the Iranians will be amenable to talk.

Pros

This option provides for exercising all peaceful options till end 2008 and gathering of operational intelligence. In case all attempts, to stall the nuclear weapons program, fail then this option will delay the program giving additional time to the world and next President to roll back or stop it. Offers of direct negotiation with Iran is a new phenomenon that Iranians will be challenged to handle. Delayed program and an opportunity to engage with the West and new President will open fissures in Iran's power centres due to competing interests. Even a partially successful strike will result in purging of military hierarchy and shake the regimes confidence. Internal turmoil and confusion in Iran will also reduce interference in Iraq. This will also prevent nuclear race in the region. This option realises all the objectives before Iran achieves technological breakthrough. It also ensures that minimum number of troops are exposed to harm. Has the highest possibility of success.

Cons

It is difficult to plan airstrike and achieve credible hits as the targets are dispersed. The plan needs good intelligence to succeed. World condemnation will be significant, especially if there are collateral damages to civilians. However, this will fade eventually with time. Military strikes may spike terrorist violence but they are already operating at optimum capacity. In the worst-case scenario, the strike may align the hierarchy and infuse new zeal to fulfil national

objective to procure nuclear weapons. This does not alter the status quo. Iran may also react violently to launch attacks in Iraq or strike US assets in the Persian Gulf.

Analysis

To achieve any credible result, in the changing behaviour of Iran, it is extremely important for the US also to change its approach. A centre of line approach for three decades has given no results and this is an opportunity to shift gears towards one extreme or other. Iran has settled down in a comfort zone. It is exploiting its vast energy resources, lack of cohesive world policy towards unified engagement with Iran and commitment of the US military forces elsewhere to further its agenda of becoming a nuclear power and interference in the regional affairs. Incremental engagement policy and soft sanctions have only emboldened Iran. Its leadership has calculated that reluctance of the current US administration to directly engage with Iran, either militarily or diplomatically, will allow a free run to cross the 'point of no return' thus delivering an irreversible fait accompli of its nuclear power status. This status quo can be only changed by a shock effect. I feel, any direct intrusion into Iran, either by military means or diplomatically or both, will paralyze the multifaceted government structure of Iran to a completely new situation resulting in its change or its behaviour. In case this is not feasible, the US should prepare to coexist with nuclear Iran and retool its policy to contain Iran by positive and negative engagement.

Recommendation

I recommend that **Option 3** should be exercised to forestall the Iranian nuclear weapons program before the 'point of no return' is crossed. It is the most viable approach given the geopolitical condition in the world and forthcoming change in the administration. It achieves all the objectives. It does need a strong political structure. However, if political considerations preclude execution of Option 3, it is recommended that Option 2 be exploited to shape the future relationship of the US with a nuclear Iran.

About the Author

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, (Retd) carries experience across various terrain and operational environments. Commissioned into the 9th Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry Regiment, he has showcased exemplary leadership in diverse roles, including participation in Operation Vijay (Kargil) in 1999. With notable commands at Siachen Glacier, Chushul Sector in Eastern Ladakh, and prestigious appointments such as GOC of the 15 Corps in Kashmir valley, he has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in challenging scenarios.

His illustrious career encompasses instructional roles at the National Defence Academy, service as a Military Observer in UNTAC, Cambodia, and pivotal staff appointments along the Line of Control and in Army Commands. Holding two postgraduate degrees from esteemed institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the National War College at National Defence University, Washington D.C., as well as an M.Phil from the National Defence College, New Delhi, he is renowned for his strategic acumen and expertise.



All Rights Reserved 2025 Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied, archived, retained or transmitted through print, speech or electronic media without prior written approval from CLAWS. The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.