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## WILL IRAN CROSS THE NUCLEAR THRESHOLD?

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The political demonstrations in Iran since September 2022, when a young Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, was jailed for not wearing the hijab and died in custody,<sup>1</sup> have confronted Iran's leadership with its greatest challenge<sup>2</sup> as protestors demand individual rights, political reforms, and increasingly, an end to the Islamic Republic.<sup>3</sup> The harsh measures to quell the demonstrations<sup>4</sup> have only encouraged the protests to continue. The United States swiftly expressed support, denouncing Iran's "vicious" response. President Biden has delayed negotiations over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015<sup>5</sup> after five years of intense negotiations with the P5+1 to restrict Iran's enrichment program, and levied additional sanctions on Iran to apply maximum pressure and punishment for mishandling of demonstrations.<sup>6</sup> Iran's economy is already reeling under crippling sanctions.



Iran claims that sanctions are aimed to pressurize Iran to suspend its nuclear programme which is seen as an "excruciating threat" by the US,<sup>7</sup> and to bring about a regime change. However, Iran has demonstrated high degree of resilience in refusing to capitulate to the US strategy of maximum pressure.<sup>8</sup> Basically, the US wants to bring Iran back into its orbit of influence. Iran's location at the Strait of Hormuz, from where 30% of world oil is transported, is of strategic importance.<sup>9</sup> The US wishes to ensure unrestricted navigation through the Straits,<sup>10</sup> as well as to preserve its influence in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> If Iran does not fall in line with the US strategic interests, it will make every effort to prevent Iran from getting closer to either Russia or China.

For Iran, development of nuclear technology and nuclear programme are a means to assert its sovereignty and consolidate its position at the international level. It is a signatory to the NPT<sup>12</sup> (that allows Iran to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes) and has adopted the IAEA safeguards.<sup>13</sup> But the international community suspects Iran has expertise for advanced nuclear capabilities.<sup>14</sup> After the US withdrew from JCPOA in 2018, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium had expanded, especially in 2021 and 2022<sup>15</sup> and suspected that Iran possessed sufficient fissile material to develop a nuclear bomb soon.<sup>16</sup> IAEA also claimed that Iran has increased weapons-grade uranium from 25.2 kg to 87.5kg<sup>17</sup> and the centrifuges using the IR-2 that is against the JCPOA.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the US is also suspicious of Iran's ballistic missile programme.<sup>19</sup>

The US is constantly highlighting Iran's nuclear weapons spectre as a threat to global peace to justify its strategy of maximum pressure, in the hope that it will abandon its nuclear programme. To counter the US, Iran is utilizing every opportunity to strengthen its relations with Russia and China. Being averse to US hegemony, Russia and China consider Iran as firmly embedded in their camp against the US.<sup>20</sup> Russia has signed a 20-year strategic partnership with Iran.<sup>21</sup> Both are working to establish new bilateral relationships.<sup>22</sup> The Ukraine war has also presented Iran with new opportunities. Iran has delivered several

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hundred drones to Russia in response to a potential \$40 billion energy deal.<sup>23</sup> Both Iran and Russia believe that closer bilateral partnership is necessary to achieve a less "West-centric" world.<sup>24</sup> China signed a 25-year cooperation program with Iran in 2022.<sup>25</sup> President Raisi's recent visit to China signals strengthening of economic and energy links along the "Belt and Road" initiative.<sup>26</sup> However, western analysts have presented the visit as significant only in optics without any concrete agreements on China's investment in Iran.<sup>27</sup>

***Iran's civilizational past shapes its political outlook as a regional power. Hence, its resolve to be recognized and accepted as such acts as a catalyst to develop its nuclear capability.***

Iran's civilizational past shapes its political outlook as a regional power.<sup>28</sup> Hence, its resolve to be recognized and accepted as such acts as a catalyst to develop its nuclear capability. The Abraham Accords 2020 and Negev Summit 2022<sup>29</sup> that helped mend ties between Israel and Arab

countries, have further exacerbated rivalry between Iran and the Arab world meaning Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> Iran is convinced that the West would ensure it does not feel secure enough to gain power and presence in the Persian Gulf region. Israel's recent drone attacks, with a tacit US nod,<sup>31</sup> on Iran's nuclear facility have confirmed its apprehensions.<sup>32</sup> Iran has declared it will respond to western pressures by increasing and improving its nuclear programme.<sup>33</sup>

The question is what would be the tipping point. The US will keep Iran under maximum pressure but not to the extent that Iran feels insecure enough to declare itself as a nuclear power. It will continue to use ambiguity as a bargaining chip with the European and the Middle Eastern countries to preserve its integrity and prestige and persuade the US to remove sanctions or offer rewards for remaining nuclear-free, as was done by North Korea and Pyongyang in the past.<sup>34</sup> Iran also wants the international world to recognize its nuclear program as a legitimate one. But if Iran is pushed to the wall, it will very likely further advance its nuclear programme but may not cross the threshold for the time being.

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