

Timothy Compston assesses the fallout from the negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme and asks whether current efforts to curb nuclear proliferation are working

PROLIFERATION

With a resolution to the issue of Iran's nuclear programme apparently more likely thanks to the recently announced framework agreement, this is a good time to reflect the current state of international nuclear proliferation. Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea all have a well-established nuclear capability, alongside the big four members of the nuclear club, namely the US, Russia, the UK and France. Given the growing tensions in the Middle East, with Sunni-Shia clashes more pronounced, should Iran try to acquire a bomb the likelihood is that Saudi Arabia will seek to follow suit. Closer to home Ukraine – a country which gave up its Soviet-era nuclear arsenal for security guarantees – may be tempted back into the nuclear fold thanks to the situation in Crimea and the continued turmoil in the east of the country, although claims to this effect may be more bluster than a serious intent.

The danger of course – and the reason why so much energy is put into preventing proliferation – is that once countries acquire nuclear weapons history has shown they are extremely reluctant to get rid of them, with South Africa and Ukraine (and some of the other former Soviet Republics) being notable exceptions. A multi-lateral nuclear-armed world is certainly a dangerous one, where old constructs like mutually assured destruction (MAD) do not necessarily hold sway anymore. While there may be fewer nuclear delivery systems and warheads around than at the height of the Cold War, the reality is that it just takes one miscalculation for things to escalate out of control, and the more fingers on buttons the greater the chance that something will go wrong. In these uncertain times there is also the worry that the more countries which have “the bomb”, the greater the potential for such technology to fall into the hands of non-state actors who may not have any qualms about using it. The fact that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists advanced its famous Doomsday clock to three minutes to midnight in January is a reflection of nuclear disarmament efforts going off the rails as many countries, including the major nuclear powers, look to ramp-up rather than cut back on their capabilities.

Officials from Iran and the so-called P5+1 group of powers – the US, UK, France, Russia, China and Germany – have now produced a framework agreement which seeks to put limits on Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. It is hoped this will extend to a more detailed accord, with a deadline set of 30 June 2015 for a comprehensive pact. The framework agreement and the prospect of a final deal was welcomed by US President Obama, who to date has been a strong advocate of the process. He said in a statement, issued at the time: “This will be a long-term deal that addresses each path to a potential Iranian nuclear bomb.” President Obama was also quick to

underline the importance of verification: “If Iran cheats, the world will know.”

According to the US State Department, the agreement will see the number of centrifuges that Iran could, potentially use to enrich uranium to weaponisable levels drop by more than two-thirds. Other features of the agreement, singled out by the State Department, include: the requirement to alter the design of Iranian power plants so they cannot produce weapons-grade plutonium; regular inspections; and an agreement not to enrich uranium above 3.67 per cent for 15 years.

The reaction in Iran has been extremely positive, with crowds celebrating on the streets of Tehran after news of the framework agreement broke. This reaction has been fuelled in part by the prospect that, in return for Iran's co-operation, some sanctions, which have served as a major brake on the Iranian economy, may now be lifted. The Iranian foreign minister, Javid Zarif, acknowledged Iran still has serious differences with the United States, but stressed he was hopeful that, with a good implementation, some of the mutual mistrust which has built up in the past could “be remedied”. “That is for us all to wait and see,” he said.

For his part, US Senator Bob Corker, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is still sceptical of Iran's intentions and has been championing the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act 2015 with support from all sides of the political spectrum. This was debated recently on the Senate floor following a unanimous, bipartisan, vote in his committee backing the bill. The rationale for this measure is that it would require the President to submit any final nuclear deal with Iran to Congress before being able to waive or suspend Congressional sanctions. Corker is determined to give Congress a voice in the process. Speaking at a time when he has enough Senate sponsors to override any Presidential veto, Corker was quick to thank

“**This will be a long-term deal that addresses each path to a potential Iranian nuclear bomb. If Iran cheats, the world will know.”** President Barack Obama



ON GAMES



those who had given it their backing: "I appreciate my colleagues for supporting the only bill capable of overcoming a veto that will limit the President's authority to unilaterally implement a nuclear deal with Iran." He went on to explain some of the concrete differences that passage of the bill would make to the process of dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue: "It will provide strict enforcement mechanisms to hold Iran accountable and require more detailed reporting on Iranian involvement in terrorism than ever before. I urge all of my colleagues

to seize this opportunity to restore a Congressional role in one of the most consequential national security issues of our time."

It is perhaps not too surprising, given the fraught relationship between Israel and Iran, that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should voice grave concerns over any deal with Iran under the current negotiating process. He also stressed the potential implications of an agreement for the survival of Israel and the stability of the wider region. He expressed

PROLIFERATION GAMES



©Getty Images

this view, in no uncertain terms, when he addressed a session of the US Congress in March, during which he characterised Iran as a “threat to the entire world”, and stated “Iran has proved time and again that it cannot be trusted.” Of course, Israel is itself an undeclared nuclear power, which poses the wider question of why it is legitimate for some states to have such weapons and not others, but that is a much wider argument.

The Iranian question aside, nuclear proliferation is certainly topical at the moment, as the UN Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty review conference is underway in New York during April and May. It is certainly true that the number of active nuclear warheads held by the existing nuclear powers is now in the low thousands, compared to the tens of thousands stockpiled at the height of the Cold War. But this shrinkage certainly does not leave any room for complacency, as a recent BBC news report revealed the US is considering spending more than \$1trillion over the next 30 years modernising its weapons. Russia has also recently announced plans to embark on a major rejuvenation of all three arms of its nuclear forces – land, sea and air. Of course, the advent of anti-ballistic missile systems is also a factor for countries such as Russia looking to ensure their weapons still present a viable deterrent. Beyond this, it has been widely acknowledged that the US has invested in bunker buster bombs with a view to having an option to take-out underground nuclear facilities if the threat posed by countries like Iran or even North Korea cannot be contained.

Other nuclear-armed states that are continuing to invest in their nuclear delivery systems include India – as evidence by its planned order of four Arihant-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines with, the first of which is now undergoing sea trials. It is thought that India's neighbour and rival Pakistan also has between 100 and 120 warheads – a sizeable arsenal

– and that by 2020 it could potentially have enough nuclear material for 200. Putting Pakistan's nuclear programme into a wider context, it was suggested in a BBC Newsnight report back in 2013 that, given Saudi Arabia's heavy investment in Pakistani nuclear weapons projects, this would be their most likely source should they deem events in Iraq warranted it. It was surmised that these could then be married to CSS-2 ballistic missiles which, the report alleged, were secretly acquired from China in the 1980s. Whether Saudi Arabia would look to Pakistan or seek to develop its own indigenous nuclear weapons is open to debate, of course, but what is clear is that should Iran go nuclear the Saudis are unlikely to sit silently on the side-lines.

Meanwhile the major concern around nuclear-armed North Korea is over their ability to miniaturise their nuclear devices and to develop effective delivery systems. The test firing of a three-stage rocket back in 2012 demonstrated the progress Pyongyang has been made in this area, and caused alarm among states far removed from its borders. Given the ballistic missile threat, both nuclear and conventional, we are likely to see a much greater focus on land and sea-based anti-ballistic missile interceptor systems, which could deal with a limited salvo of missiles.

The hope has to be that the framework agreement with Iran will signal a new direction in efforts to keep the spread of nuclear weapons in check. Sadly, this step has to be set against the high level of mistrust between countries in the region and the reality that, globally, those states which already have nuclear weapons are showing few signs of reducing their arsenals and delivery capabilities to set an example to the smaller players. If anything, the moves we are seeing from the US and Russia, among others, are very much in the opposite direction.

Historic deal? The P5+1 negotiations have taken a step closer to a lasting agreement over Iran's nuclear programme

Timothy Compston is a freelance journalist and PR professional who specialises in security issues. He studied International Relations and Strategic Studies at Lancaster University, is PR director of Compston PR and a previous chairman of both the National PR Committee and CCTV PR Committee of the British Security Industry Association (BSIA).