Prevent and Defend: Threat Perceptions and Iran's Defence Policy

Saideh Lotfian

Abstract

Many western politicians and commentators have described Iran's national security policies in the years after the Islamic Revolution as antagonistic, “breaking the rules of the game” and threatening to other countries. While most Iranian scholars have argued that Iran should not be viewed as a threat to the Middle East and the international society at large. In fact, their counter-argument is that the post-1979 Iran has played a “pacifying” role in its unstable and conflict-prone environment. Important dimensions of Iran's defense policy will be examined in order to find answers to the following questions: What are the main challenges and opportunities for Iran’s ambition to improve its relative power position in the region, considering the perceptions of the great powers and key regional states of the “Iran threat”? Is Iran’s foreign and security policies expansionist or defensive? Should its defense policy be viewed as a threat to regional security?

Keywords: Islamic Republic of Iran, Defense Policy, Security, Threats, Perceptions, Middle East.

*Professor of Political Science, University of Tehran.
Introduction
In political circles inside and outside the country, different views on the past lessons and the future directions of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy have been expressed. A group of Iranian realist specialists concentrating on long-term national interests of the country have strongly recommended that Iranian government should move in the direction of improving its relations with its Arab neighbors in the region and with the Western countries. The critics of this view have argued that any attempt to normalize relations with the US and to enhance ties with the West will be detrimental to Iranian national interest. They have pointed out that Iranian government under President Khatami implemented a more constructive foreign policy, and went as far as giving some assistance to the US war efforts in Afghanistan with the aim of overthrowing the Taliban regime in Kabul, despite the fact that Iranians were opposed to the US bombing of Afghan territories. Taliban fighters were assisted by the foreign forces which had ties with the al-Qaeda network. Instead of acknowledging Iran’s constructive role in its anti-terrorism campaign, former US President Bush placed Iran in an “Axis of Evil” alongside Iraq and North Korea, and continued economic sanctions against Iran. To advance its security interest without dependency on the West, the Islamic republic has concentrated on military modernization and efforts to expand bilateral and multilateral ties with diverse countries excluding Israel and the US.

For the purpose of understanding the complex dimensions and the implications of Iran’s defense policies, the following questions
I. Perceptions of Power, Status and Threats in Iran’s Defense Policymaking

Realists in international relations and foreign policy analysis predict that power inequality could lead to heightened threat perception and even conflicts. They assert that the states, which are in a militarily weak position, are more likely to have a heightened sense of being threatened by others. Social constructionists in the field of international relations argue that having a shared identity might change threat perceptions leading to a reduction, and even in some cases, to the elimination of mutual suspicion and mistrust among nations. If these hypotheses are true, then a major part of the mutual suspicion between the Sunni Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf and the predominantly-Shiite Iran has to do with the differences in the national attributes of the two sides. The major reasons for the concerns of the smaller Arab states about Iranian intentions and defense policies could be sought in the preponderance of Iran’s military power, and its ability to project its “soft” power in the neighboring areas. Iran has been the biggest winner in the new regional security environment, created by the fall of Saddam’s regime in Baghdad and the Taliban’s rulers in Kabul. Although the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan brought more American troops near Iranian borders, but Iran’s elites have viewed the presence of foreign forces in the Persian Gulf and the economic sanctions imposed on Iran as...
surmountable security challenges which would create a stronger and more independent Iran.

According to the realists, threat perception is a function of power inequality and imbalance. If country A is more powerful than its neighboring country B, the latter must feel more threatened since nothing in the international system will prevent A from using force against B as a means of dealing with a bilateral conflict. In the Hobbesian world, all states must be suspicious of the intentions of their adversaries and allies alike, because today’s friends might become tomorrow’s enemies in a future war. The balance of power theory advocates have posed a key question concerning the importance of ideology in threat perceptions of the elites and top decision-makers: To what extend do they value ideology over national interest in their calculation of costs of security policies?

It is then extremely crucial to understand the perceptions of Iranian policymakers, and the misperceptions of their opponents. Any attempts to analyze Iranian intentions on the basis of simplistic stereotypes are misleading. One cannot ignore interactions between Iran’s domestic political dynamics and its foreign policy positions. In recent years, Iranian political elites have tried to mobilize domestic political support in opposition to US military presence in the Persian Gulf, and in defense of the country’s nuclear program.

II. An Assessment of Iran’s Defense Policy Objectives

Iran’s defense policy is formulated to protect sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and vital interests of the country. Looking at the current Iranian strategic debate about what kind of role should the Islamic republic play in the world, one main point is clear: Even if the glorious days of the Persian Empire have long passed, there is a remarkable consensus among the rival political groups that Iran should progressively regain its great power status. Some Iranian experts have argued that Iran should be concerned with economic development, and not military power. Others have said that Iran’s
role as a security player in the region should be expanded since the Islamic Republic's military capabilities are evaluated as significantly improving. The importance of major foreign policy issues to political leaders has been determined by domestic political developments and system preservation more than regional or international security considerations.

What are the limits of Iran's power and its capacity to withstand external pressures? In 1994, Chubin presented a dismal picture of Iran’s economic weakness and strategic isolation, despite its inherent regional status originating from its geostrategic advantages and its population size relative to its neighbors. Contrary to the pessimism about the ability of the Iranian government to enhance the relative position of Iran in the Middle East, we have witness the rise of a stronger Iran as a result of positive changes in the regional security environment, most notably the overthrow of the Baathist regime in Baghdad, the removal of Taliban in Kabul, the gradual move by Ankara to distant Turkey from Israel, and the onset of “Arab uprising” threatening the pro-American regimes. Against all odds, Iran has been able to overcome the West and become “a new emerging world power in International Relations.”

Islamic Republic did not seek to overcome its vulnerability by alliance with great powers. The price of Soviet protection against western aggression would have been loss of freedom and political choice, and sacrifice of cherished autonomy. Iran opted to maintain a modern defense capability, not for fighting but for deterring foreign invasion. Dehshiri and Majidi indicated that an enduring principle of Iran’s foreign policy is “pacifism”, which is based on an Islamic principle of maintaining peace. “Iran is one of the largest and most populated Middle Eastern states, and possesses significant oil and gas resources. Yet, the Islamic republic’s military expenditures in absolute and relative terms have been lower than the military spending of most Middle Eastern countries.” According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data shown in Table, Iran’s military
burden (military expenditures as a percentage of GNP) was between 2.9-4% in the 1999-2007 period. Its military expenditures in 2008 was equal to less than one-fourth of the Saudi, and about half of Israeli military spending.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Military Expenditure</th>
<th>Military Burden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3200</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>4731</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>5220</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>3926</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4594</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5816</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>7213</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>7811</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>6486</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

Cordesman claims that “Iran has limited capabilities today but could become a much more threatening power if it modernized key elements of its forces and its neighbors did not react.” However, he added that “any invasion of Iran that produced a strong nationalist response, rather than a broad-based uprising against the regime, would almost certainly turn into a bloody and pointless war of attrition.” Obama Administration is aware that a war waged against the much stronger and determined Iranian forces will not be like the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Recently, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta talked about world economic consequences of a strike on Iran.

To counterbalance US policy of isolating Iran, the more conservative Ahmadinejad adopted the same strategy that the reformist Khatami and pragmatist Rafsanjani pursued. He is trying to increase Iran’s economic and political ties in a way that adds to Iran’s friends and partners among the non-Aligned states in Latin America, Asia and Africa. His government permitted the IAEA to monitor the nuclear facilities in Natanz and Isfahan. He consented to the formation of a multilateral consortium for fuel supply, and accepted to sign the Turkey-Brazil’s brokered nuclear fuel swap deal to send Iran’s low enriched uranium to Turkey. He agreed to return the spent fuel from the Bushehr power plant to Russia to be disposed of in a
safe manner. Finally, he agreed to work with the UN to create a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East.

Iran is engaged in strengthening its military capabilities to deter US military intervention in the Persian Gulf. Iranian forces must be prepared to defend the country against ballistic missile attacks, terrorist attacks, invasion of Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf, intrusion into Iranian territorial waters by the US naval forces, and large-scale aerial bombardment and land invasion. Iran now has the most advanced missile and space programs and domestic arms industry in the Arab Middle East. With the removal of Saddam’s regime after the US-led military invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran became the only anti-status quo regional state with the actual and potential capability to challenge Israel’s qualitative military superiority. It is no wonder that Israeli leaders have expressed strong objection to Iran’s nuclear and missile programs since the late 1990s, and are waging a war of words against the Islamic Republic in the hope of an “Iraq-like” scenario of regime change for Iran.

Iran under the Shah had an ambition to become a major regional naval power. Based on the Nixon Doctrine, the Americans supported their trusted ally in the Persian Gulf in this endeavor, because a militarily strong Iran would have then been responsible for its own defense and for sharing the burden of protecting the US interest in the region. The Islamic Republic of Iran’s renewed interest in strengthening its naval forces can be explained by the following goals: patrol oil shipping lanes, collect intelligence on the movement of foreign naval vessels, defend Iranian cargo ships against piracy, be ready for search and rescue missions, and demonstrate Iranian naval power amid reports of possible strike against its nuclear sites. Iran’s naval forces have been sent to the Bab el-Mandeb, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden since 2008 when Somali pirates hijacked an Iranian-chartered cargo ship. The Iranian Navy launched Jamaran, its first domestically-manufactured destroyer, in the Persian Gulf in February 2010. The recent US “rapid reaction” joint war
games with Bahrain, which hosts the 5th Fleet and the US Naval Forces Central Command, are considered as part of Washington’s psychological warfare waged against Iran. With a ‘tit for tat’ strategy, Iran plans to conduct a naval exercise, called *Velayat 90*, in the Sea of Oman and the north of the Indian Ocean.  

The self-assessment and the threat perception of the Iranian leaders have led to Iran’s growing inventory of ballistic missiles, particularly the deployment of the medium-range Shahab-3 missiles, and its space launch vehicle program. In 2005, Iranian government announced the allocation of $500 million for Iran’s Space Agency (ISA) over the next five years, after the launch of Iran’s first commercial satellite on a Russian rocket. Since then, Iran has joined the club of a few countries with the capability of launching satellites into space. Iran launched its first satellite called Omid (hope) into orbit in February 2009; and its second one named Rasad (observation) aboard Iranian ‘Safir’ satellite-launching rocket in June 2011 on a “topography” mission. The ISA is planning to establish a satellite launch center with the cooperation of the Ministry of Defense in the less-populated southeastern parts of the country.

III. Iran in the Threat Perceptions of Other States

*a. The Perceptions of Iran Threat in US Middle East Policy.* Since the revolution, Iran has become not just an impending but an actual political problem for American foreign policymakers. Speaking to the journalists after the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in November 2011, President Obama feared that: “Iran with nuclear weapons would pose a threat not only to the region but also to the United States.” In 2009, he had reportedly made similar comments: Iranian “actions over many years now ... create the possibility of destabilizing the region and are not only contrary to our interests, but I think are contrary to the interests of international peace.”

In the Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on
February 2010, former Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair mentioned “Iran” and “Iranian” about sixty times and called Iran a real threat to the national interest of the US and its allies. He complained about Iranian inattention to the UN Security Council Resolutions calling on Iran to limit its nuclear and missile programs. He then expressed concern that the Islamic Republic of Iran’s nuclear program might lead to a regional arms race if the other states in the Middle East follow the example of Iran in the development of nuclear capability. Blair stated that:

“We continue to assess Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that bring it closer to being able to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.”

On the issue of Iran’s Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU), He added that:

“Iran’s technical advancement, particularly in uranium enrichment, strengthens our 2007 NIE assessment that Iran has the scientific, technical and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons, making the central issue its political will to do so. These advancements lead us to reaffirm our judgment from the 2007 NIE that Iran is technically capable of producing enough HEU for a weapon in the next few years, if it chooses to do so.”

This perceived ‘Iran threat’ has greatly influenced the US foreign policy towards the Middle East. American politicians have openly voiced anti-Iran views, and some of them have called for arming the enemies of the Islamic Republic. There have even been calls for preemptive strikes on Iran. Initially, Iranian politicians invested a great
deal of efforts in creating ambiguities over how they will react to an attack. Due to the increased frequency of military threats issued by the Americans and Israelis, and the changed saliency of these threats in the minds of the Iran’s political and military elites, the Iranians have become more outspoken in their retorts. A good place to begin an analysis of Iran’s reactions to an attack is the Supreme Leader’s own word. Ayatollah Khamenei recently stressed that: “Anybody who cherishes the thought of attacking the Islamic Republic of Iran should be prepared to receive strong slaps and powerful punches from the Iranian nation, the Revolutionary Guards, the Army and Basij.”

Earlier, he had mentioned the high cost of Iran-Iraq war, and reminded the potential attackers that: "The resistance and victory of the Iranian nation in the imposed war proved to the world that attacking the Islamic Republic is costly." Iran would retaliate against US forces if it comes under attack by the US or Israel. Ayatollah Khamenei had said that "the Americans should know that if they assault Iran, their interest will be harmed anywhere in the world that is possible." Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a former Chief Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (1997-2007) who is now a senior military advisor to the Supreme Leader issued a new warning to the Americans: “The IRGC controls the identity and destination of every US warship which intends to pass through the Strait of Hormuz.”

Iran has been a controversial topic of discussion by the 2012 US presidential candidates from the two largest political parties. Republican presidential candidates made some provocative comments about the US policy towards Iranian nuclear program. Rick Perry said: "Obviously, we are going to support Israel. And I’ve said that we will support Israel in every way that we can, whether it’s diplomatic, whether it’s economic sanctions, whether it’s overt or covert operations, up to and including military action.”

The GOP candidates have been described by an American neoconservative political analyst as “hawkish and exceptionalist, neo-
Reaganite and neoconservative, pro-defense and pro-Israel, and skeptical of the U.N. and the State Department. In reaction to his rivals in the presidential race, Barak Obama is trying to show that he has not been too soft on Iran. George Bush made clear that Iran belonged to an “Axis of Evil”, and he expected the western allies to work together in order to punish Iran in the hope of changing its foreign policy behaviors. Barak Obama’s position in regard to the issue of Iran’s nuclear issue had been ambivalent. While indicating that he supports diplomatic means of conflict resolution, he says “all options are on the table”. In a recent White House press release, it is claimed that his administration’s policies has slowed the Iranian nuclear program, stymied Iran’s access to the international financial system, hindered Iran’s oil and gas sector, exposed Iran’s support for terrorism, and demonstrated US support for universal human rights. Will a new republican president winning the US presidential election be able to create a region-wide anti-Iranian alliance for a third US war in the region? Will the reelected Obama be able to engage Iran? One of the US goals is to ensure that the other Muslim Middle Eastern states do not follow Iranian enrichment program. For Israelis, the goal is to safeguard their nuclear monopoly in the region by making sure that no other regional state would acquire nuclear capability or even get near “break-out” capacity.

A reason for Iranian reluctance for the renewal of nuclear talks has been given by President Ahmadinejad in February 2007, when he commented on the nature of the "aggressive powers": "If you pull back, they will push ahead, but if you stand against them, because of this resistance, they will back off." These distrustful attitudes towards negotiation with the US are expressed by Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, who rejected to the latest offer of direct Tehran-Washington talks made by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the following statement: "As long as you are not honest in your intention, talks would be meaningless." Some key leaders still harbor anti-US animosity from the 1979 revolution, while others cannot get over the
resentment they feel towards the American government for its key role in ousting the government of Prime Minister Mossadegh. The experience of the 1953 Iranian coup d'état has influenced threat perceptions of the Iranian leaders to such an extent that most of them are obsessively concerned with foreign hidden agenda to undermine the regime in Tehran by force."This perception has been reinforced by the neoconservative pronouncements of the US “regime change” policy during the Bush Administration.

Russia as one of the P5 with veto power at the UN Security Council has become an important partner for the Islamic Republic. Since the 1990s, Moscow has been a major source of nuclear technology due to the refusal of the Western countries to cooperate with Iran in the construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactor. Given the geostrategic value of Iran, the Russian government has not terminated its economic and political ties with Tehran despite increasing pressures exerted by Washington. On the one hand, Moscow considers the economic benefits of cooperating with Iran in its expanding nuclear reactor programs, and looks forward to being able to sign more lucrative contracts to build more nuclear power plants in Iran as well as other Middle Eastern countries. On the other hand, Russia does not want a nuclear-capable Iran with more influence in Central Asia and Caucasus. This concern has led the Russians to vote in favor of the UN Security Council resolutions which imposed several rounds of sanctions on Iran since 2006."

The opposition to the deployment of missile defense system of US and the NATO in their neighborhood is a point of convergence in Russo-Iranian bilateral relations. Iranian and Russian officials have expressed concerns over the contentious issue of Ankara’s decision to host early warning radar for NATO missile defense shield on its territory. In general, Russia has its own misgivings about the stationing of US missile defense system near its territory."Unlike Russia, China is cautious about its nuclear cooperation with Iran. Both are eager to pursue a peaceful resolution, and
acknowledge that Iran has a legitimate right to peaceful nuclear technology, and that the security concerns of Iran should be understood. Being the major trading partners of Iran, both states are reluctant to impose harsh sanctions against the country in such a way that might curtail their trade ties. Some Iranian analysts have highlighted the value of energy resources of Iran as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with China and the other Asian powers. As a result of tightening of sanctions, Chinese companies might become more involved in Iran’s energy sector. As expected, Iranian officials have rejected the adverse impact of sanctions on the Iranian economy. For example, a former Foreign Minister of Iran Ali Akbar Velayati (1981-1997), and a member of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (since 2006) at the Beït-e Rabbâri (the Office of the Supreme Leader) downplayed the impact of the new sanctions by saying that these anti-Iran sanctions are ineffective weapons of the United States and will have no impact on Iran. It is clear that Chinese foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic will be determined by its economic interest, its relations with the United States, and its ties with the oil-rich counties in the region.

b. Arab Threat Perceptions Focused on Iran: In the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution with its Islamic characterization, the dominant views of the Arab traditional regimes was that the new Iranian government’s intention is to export its brand of revolutionary ideas. The Iranian officials usually responded to these accusations by saying that Iran had no plan to expand its influence beyond its border by force, or to intervene in the internal affairs of the other countries, because Iranians were satisfied with their political map. However, they have also said that Iran will remain faithful to the Islamic principles and will work toward the unity of the Islamic World. Iranian government’s policy of supporting Islamic movements was exceptionally true in the early years of the revolution.

The indiscr...
strategic objectives of Iran. For example, the 2009 undiplomatic and misquoted comment made by a former speaker of Iranian Parliament (Majlis) Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar Nategh-Noori that Bahrain is the 14th province of Iran was expertly taken out of context, and led to the tension between Iran, Bahrain and its Arab friends. Morocco cut off its diplomatic relations with Iran, and even pro-Iranian Hamas leaders stated that they are “concerned and astonished.” After his provocative remarks, Iranian foreign ministry tried to restore confidence by reassuring Manama that Iran respects Bahrain’s sovereignty and independence. Israeli officials and the unpopular autocratic Arab governments have tried to underscore the tactless or blundering statements made by some Iranian officials and commentators on regional issues in the hope of causing discord between Iran and the Arabs. The aim is to divert attention of the Muslim nations from the Israeli occupation of Palestine and other issues which are likely to breed Arab hostility towards their leaders.\footnote{42}

According to the classified US material released by the WikiLeaks, the rulers of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia secretly urged the US to launch an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities and put an end to the Iranian nuclear ambition.\footnote{43}Iranian President Ahmadinejad rejected these allegations, and said: “We neighboring countries are friends, and these malicious moves will have no effect on our relations.” Other Iranian politicians accused the CIA of producing these documents.\footnote{44}“The nature of Iran’s bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia will be a function of changes in the regional security environment. However, a certain degree of rivalry between the two countries over the distribution of power in the Persian Gulf subsystem will continue in the near future. A Saudi commentator bemoans Iran’s influence in the region by claiming that Iran is involved in all major issues of the Arab World in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. He accuses Iran of snatching these affairs from the hands of the Arabs who were previously responsible for handling them.\footnote{45}

A political scientist at the University of Tehran, Ebrahim
Mottaghi asserts that the US has created an effective anti-Iran coalition of the authoritarian Arab regimes to widen the gap between the Shia Iran and the predominantly Sunni Middle Easterners in order to confront the growth of Iranian influence in the region. The Persian Gulf is a region where Iran has the greatest concern. To confront the expansion of American military presence in its periphery, Iranian government has tried to improve its relations with its neighbors bilaterally, and through a multilateral mechanism. Iran is excluded from the two key Arab regional organizations (the GCC and the Arab League). Some of the blame for the anti-Iran stance of the Arab governments lies at the door of the U.S., which is believed to have exaggerated the threat of the Iranian nuclear program to maintain its network of military bases in the region.

Iran’s regional adversaries and rivals particularly the traditional monarchies in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE welcome any measure aimed at reducing the power and influence of the Islamic Republic because they are worried that the United States and the other major extra-regional powers might recognize the regional ascendancy of the non-Arab Iran. However, most Arab nations do not favor confrontation with Iran, because it is not in their interest to see more regional instability. The Iranian policymakers have been keen on gaining the support of the Arab countries for Iran’s position on the nuclear issue in the Middle East, and have drawn their attention to the discriminatory character of the non-proliferation regime which has largely ignored Israel’s nuclear arsenal.

c. Iran’s Place in the Threat Perceptions of the Non-Arab Middle Eastern States: Turkey and Israel: The bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran have changed from what were called “uneasy” to friendly. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) transformed Turkey into an important trading partner for the Islamic Republic. In 1996, the same year in which Turkey and Iran concluded two trade and natural gas supply deals, the existence of a secret Turco-Israeli “open skies” arrangement was revealed. The bilateral security and defense agreements permitted
Israel to use Turkish airspace for training and surveillance. Not surprisingly, this disclosure led to Iranian suspicion of the motives of Ankara. It was obvious that Iran would be concerned about the Turkish-Israeli military cooperation, which had brought Israel in the vicinity of Iranian borders “in the form of intelligence listening posts on Turkish soil”, and access to Turkish airspace to facilitate bombing of Iranian military infrastructure in an operation similar to Israel’s 1981 air strike against Iraq’s Osirak nuclear facility.

Since it is crucial for Iran to seek deeper economic integration with Turkey as a window to Europe, Iran has pursued a policy of rapprochement with its northwestern neighbor. In June 2004, Tehran and Ankara signed a border security agreement which designates the PKK as a terrorist organization. The PKK militants have been suspected of sabotage operations aimed at damaging Iran-Turkey gas pipelines in the past. The two neighbors have held regular meetings on border security, and become major energy partners, despite US opposition. Iran, which ranks second in the world in natural gas reserves, has indicated that it is willing to increase its natural gas export to Turkey.

Turkey decided not to cooperate with U.S. forces in invading Iraq, and thus Washington’s relations with Turkey deteriorated. The US military occupation of Iraq had a negative impact on Turkey’s security environment, because of the increased chance of sectarian violence in Iraq, and the autonomy of the Iraqi Kurds. Turkish officials are concerned that the empowerment of the Iraqi Kurds might strengthen the position of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rebels, which have long been viewed as a threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey.

In January 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan walked out of Davos forum after a public confrontation with Israeli President Shimon Peres over Israel’s assault on Gaza. A major breaking point for Turco-Israeli relations was the May 2010 IDF attacks on Turkish ship, “Mavi Marmara” which was part of a flotilla carrying
humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people in Gaza. “Turkey has gradually changed from a major ally of Israel in the region to an antagonist. In reference to the flotilla incident, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu recently said that “Israel has buried the Turkish-Israeli friendship into the deep waters of the Mediterranean by killing nine of our citizens.” “Reliant Mermaid”, a trilateral naval exercise involving military forces of US, Israel, and Turkey was carried out in January 1998 in the Mediterranean waters off the coast of Israel. The last (10th) annual joint naval search and rescue exercise was held in August 2009. Turkey stayed out of the 11th and the 12th joint naval maneuver in 2010 and 2011.

A Turkish commentator argues that Turkey has adopted a new “self-confident, multi-dimensional and dynamic foreign policy approach”. Other analysts believe that Turkey’s Middle East policy towards the Middle Eastern countries (Iraq, Iran, Israel and Syria) can be explained by domestic public opinion as well as its policy alignment with the EU. It has been pointed out that the transformation in AKP’s foreign policy is not due to further Islamization of the country, but rather the growth of an active civil society seeking to advance Turkish national interests. The other factors influencing new Turkish foreign policy orientation are: disillusionment with the EU, conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the personal attributes of a new generation of foreign policymakers led by Foreign Minister Davutoglu. He has asserted that Turkey should have “zero conflict” with all of its neighbors, and must capitalize on its soft power and the legacy of the Ottoman Empire’s involvement in the Middle East. Turkey could have cordial relations with all major actors including the US, EU, NATO, Greece, Iran, Syria, Hamas, and others.

There has been a shift in Turkey’s perceptions of threats from Iran and Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East in recent years. The factors affecting this change in attitude include the growth of Islamism in Turkey which has led to the importance of issues of
the Islamic World e.g. the occupation of Palestine, the slow process of the acceptance of Turkey’s membership in the EU, a lowering of the relative importance of Turkey’s role in the expansion of the US and NATO’s influence in the periphery of Moscow due to the appearance of potential and actual allies and partners in Central Asia and the Caucasus for the Western states, a wish to put a distance between Ankara and the expansionist policies of the extremist Netanyahu’s government, and the deadly attack on a Gaza-bound flotilla, which led to the killing of several Turkish nationals.

American Neoconservatives with an Israel-centric view of the Middle East believe that Turkey under the government of Prime Minister Erdoğan is not a reliable ally and “does not even deserve to be a NATO partner anymore,” because Ankara is no longer “on good terms with Israel.” The Turkish analysts in turn claim that the Americans should view the post-Cold War Turkey as an assertive but valued non-Arab ally of Washington in the volatile Arab North Africa and the Middle East. By agreeing to host a missile defense radar in its own territory, Ankara is indicating that it is still a steadfast NATO member.

Raising the issue of secret Israeli nuclear arsenal, Turkish President Abdullah Gül called for an understanding of Iranian position. He said: “It is important to put oneself in their [Iranian] shoes and see how they perceive threats.” He added that “We want a Middle East that is free of nuclear weapons. There are already enough tensions in the region. We believe Iran will behave responsibly.” Turkish newspaper editorials say that Ankara will not support a war against Iran. The Erdoğan government has declared its opposition to any military operations against Iranian nuclear facilities, fearing unpredictable outcome, and hinting that the American forces will not be permitted to use Turkish military facilities, particularly Incirlik air base to conduct such an attack.

Some Turkish commentators have criticized Ankara’s government for making their country dependent on the export of
natural gas from Russia and Iran, and for creating vulnerabilities by moving away from the US and NATO. The two neighbors’ cooperation in energy sector goes back to the early 1990s before the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came into power in November 2002. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu as the architect of the “zero problems with neighbors” policy of Turkey has been scolded. According to this policy, Turkey must expand its foreign relations with its past regional adversaries like Iran. Yet, Turkey has abandoned this policy in the case of Syria and has taken side with the anti-government opposition groups. “Turkish and Iranian policies towards Syria have been at odds, since the challenging Arab uprising reached the territory of one of the closes allies of Iran in the Arab World. Most Iranian analysts thought that it was not in Turkish interest to get directly involved in the US wars in the Middle East. Yet, Ankara has been at the forefront of the attempts by the US and EU to topple the Alawite Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad with the ultimate goal of eliminating the Shia Hezbollah in Lebanon. If they succeed, two major regional allies of Iran will disappear from the political scene. Even if Iran losses Syria, its power status will not be significantly affected, because it has already gained Iraq as a new strategic ally and is hopeful to get closer to the new post-revolutionary governments in the Arab World.

In contrast to Turkey which could be a neutral friend or a strategic ally, Israel as the other non-Arab Middle East country will remain a security threat and a potential enemy of the Islamic Republic. What distinguishes Israel from the other players in the region is the US -- and to a lesser degree the European-- widespread and exceptional support, which is expressed in various forms. The special US-Israel relations has developed rapidly since the 1960s, and reached a point where one imagines that the interests of the two allies in the region are intertwined. Washington and Tel Aviv are actively working to contain and weaken Iran. The options available to them to stop Iranian nuclear program are as follows: a military strike against
Iranian nuclear centers in Natanz and Qom; imposing new economic, trade, scientific and military sanctions to compel the Iranian leaders to implement the UNSC resolutions;“and accept and live with a near-nuclear Iran.”

It is not hard to find issues of grave contention in Iran-Israel’s disrupted bilateral relations. Israel views Iranian military build-up as leading to the emergence of Iran as a leading hostile military power in the region. The official Israeli threat perception of Iran can best be shown by referring to the various statements made by Israel’s politicians over the years. In 2004, Ariel Sharon stressed that Iran was a threat, "maybe the main existential threat" to Israel.**Foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman said that "Iran poses the most dangerous threat to world order."**Even if the American and the Israeli decision-makers know that a war waged against Iran would be costly, miscalculation of destructive consequences might still lead them to attack Iranian nuclear facilities.**

Deputy Head of the General Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces Major General Gholam Ali Rashid said: "We are always ready and (if we are attacked) we will pound all Israeli centers thanks to [our] missile power."** Israel is located less than 1000 km west of Iran, and is within the range of the Shahab-3 missiles. Iran’s Defense Minister Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi called these threats as part of an anti-Iran “psychological warfare” operations with the aim of putting pressures on the Iranian government to change its behaviors and policies."**Yet, the Iranian military commanders are not letting their guard down just because the Israeli officials have softened their anti-Iran rhetoric. They are making sure that their adversaries understand the magnitude of Iranian retaliatory attacks against the Israeli cities with the help of Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas.”According to Cordesman and Kleiber, the IRGC has created a special **Al Quds** Force as part of its “large intelligence operation and unconventional warfare component.” The members of this 15000-strong Force “conduct unconventional warfare overseas using various
foreign movements” (i.e., Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghani Shiite groups) as proxies.

An Israeli political scientist compares of the situation to a card game, by saying: “Now we’re not seeing talk of unilateral action but a call for a broader approach... This is all part of an ongoing complex poker game... Before the [IAEA] report’s release, there was more public discussion of a military option because Israel wanted to influence [other nations] to deal with increased sanctions. The threat of military action was the best way to do that. Now that the report is out, Israel has succeeded in making sure the report would be a catalyst for more sanctions; it achieved its goal.”

Iran is insisting on the creation of a non-discriminatory nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament, an end to the occupation of the Palestinian lands, and refuses to recognize Israel. The Israeli leaders do not seem to have an intention to join the NPT, or to agree to a denuclearization of the Middle East, or to stop calling for an end to Iran’s nuclear program. The two antagonists are poles apart.

Conclusion

Iran is a country surrounded by unstable neighbors and non-state actors (e.g., al-Qaeda, PKK, MKO) which are sources of regional instability. As long as there are efforts to portray Iran as a “threat” to the security of the regional states and to justify a concentration of US forces on Iran’s borders, the Iranian government will keep its options open by building up its conventional military capability to deter foreign aggression. Iranian scholar Dehghani Firouzabadi argues that in order for Iran to attain its sustainable development goals, “the country must not be seen as a threat to international peace and stability.” The current Iranian President has followed in the footsteps of his predecessors in his attempts to reduce tensions with Iran’s immediate neighbors. Iran is dependent on the Persian Gulf sea lanes, and has come to the realization that it must work within a strategy which takes its neighboring countries’ interests into account when
formulating defense policies.

To resolve the nuclear crisis, Iran's preference is for diplomacy; and does not want to get involved in a costly war with the US. The utility of foreign direct intervention as a means of setting disputes with Iran has been overrated. It is true that the likelihood of a war against Iran is very low, but there is a possibility of Israel's launching a desperate attack on Iranian nuclear centers as a distraction from problems at home. Iranians tend to unite and show the "rally around the flag" sentiment at times of national crises threatening their country's territorial integrity. Consequently, such a war will not be contained to the territory of Iran, and will rapidly spread to other parts of the Middle East. It is in the interest of the international community to find ways to avoid a costly war in the region, which could trigger a crisis with profound international implications. Iran's current defense policy is to build a military capability to prevent war and to defend the country. The confrontational approach has increased the pressure to invest more on arms build-up.

The goals of Iranian defense policymakers are clear: to deter foreign aggression, to defend Iran (and its allies) at times of war, and to gain a prestigious status as a dominant power. It is reasonable that Iran wants to be a key player in the Persian Gulf which is strategically important to its national security. Iranian government can live with efforts aimed at weakening Iranian economy through sanctions; and might even achieve self-sufficiency. Any operations aiming at undermining the system legitimacy by directly intervening in Iran's internal affairs on a scale that might threaten Islamic Republic's social stability or its very existence are viewed as unacceptable hostile acts. This threat assessment will continue to influence Iranian defense policy in the years to come.
Notes

1. Former IRGC commander, Mohsen Rezaie had claimed that members of the IRGC played an important role in toppling the Sunni Pashtun-dominated Taliban regime in Afghanistan by helping the rebel forces. Even before the intervention of the US and its allies, Iran was one of the major supporters of the Northern Alliance composed of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara warlords and militias. See, Iran News, 12 June 2005, p. 1.


11. In the 1994-1997, the value of Saudi arms exports from the United States was estimated $
16. The Nixon Doctrine was most explicitly applied in Oman in 1973 when the Shah sent Iranian troops to help Sultan Qaboos in his fight with the rebel forces. In a similar manner, security forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE were deployed to Bahrain in March 2011 in an attempt to defend the Al-Khalifa regime against a pro-democracy movement.
26. Ibid.


34. Some alarmist have predicted that Iran “could be a de facto nuclear power before 2011 is over”. See: Bipartisan Policy Center, Iran’s Nuclear Program: Status and Breakout Timing, 12 September 2011, p. 4. Available at: http://www.bipartisanpolicy.org/sites/default/files/Iran%20NuclearProgram.pdf.


37. It is assumed that the covert operations of the foreign intelligence agencies in Iran have been intensified to sabotage the Iranian nuclear program. Recently, the Iranian officials announced the discovery of a CIA spy network in Iran. See: “Iran Arrests 12 More CIA Agents,” Fars News Agency, 24 November 2011. Available at: http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007274713.


39. This is not the first time that Russia shows its opposition to the US and European missile shield. In 2007, Kremlin had criticized Bush administration’s agreements with Poland and the Czech Republic for the stationing of missile interceptors as well as radar in their territories for the declared goal of protecting Europe against future missiles from North Korea and Iran. Putin threatened to make these missile-defense sites targets for the Russian strategic missile forces. Moreover, Russian President Putin proposed US-
Prevent and Defend: Threat Perceptions and Iran’s Defence Policy


42. For example see, Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, The Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commonwealth Center, Iran and the Persian Gulf, 2 March 2009. Available at: http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/iran_e005.pdf.


48. Iran and Turkey as members of the anti-Soviet Central Treaty Organization (1955-1979) were regional allies along with Iraq (until 1959), Pakistan and the UK. In 1964, the three pro-US countries (Iran, Turkey and Pakistan) established the Regional Cooperation and Development (which was dissolved after the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979), and in 1985 created the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). The ECO was expanded in 1992 with the admission of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. See, http://www.ecosecretariat.org.

49. John Calabrese, “Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship,” British Journal of
After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ankara and Tehran became rivals for gaining more


Dov Waxman, "Turkey and Israel: a new Balance of Power in the Middle East." The

F. Stephen Larrabee, Troubled Partnership: U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global
Geopolitical Change, Sama Monica, CA: RAND, 2010, p. 34.

PKK Claims Responsibility for Blasting Iran-Turkey Gas Pipeline,” Fars News
9005230211.

“Iran’s Gas to Reach Europe via Turkey,” Tehran Times, 25 November 2011. Available at:
to-reach-europe-via-turkey.

“An International Law Analysis of the Flotilla Crisis between Turkey And Israel,” the
Journal of Turkish Weekly, 26 November 2011. Available at: http://www.turkishweekly.net; and Tarik Oguzlu, “Explaining Turkish and Israeli
perseverance in the flotilla crisis,” Today’s Zaman, 12 September 2011. Available at:

Available at: http://www.hurriyetedailynews.com/n.php?n=israel-buried-friendship-
davutoglu-2011-11-25.

Bülent Aras, “Turkey’s rise in the Greater Middle East: Peace-building in the Periphery,”

Mustafa Aydin and Sinem A. Acikmese, “Europeanization through EU conditionality:
understanding the new era in Turkish foreign policy,” Journal of Southern Europe and

Ziya Meral and Jonathan Paris, “Decoding Turkish Foreign Policy Hyperactivity,”

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ankara and Tehran became rivals for gaining more
influence in the newly independent Central Asian republics, and supported the opposite
sides in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

http://www.todayzaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsByItemId.action?newsId=263148

“Turkey says Iran’s nuclear ambitions may be about threats it perceives,” Today’s Zaman,
22 November 2011. Available at:http://www.todayzaman.com/news-263542-turkey-
says-irans-nuclear-ambitions-may-be-about-threats-it-perceives.html


Laleh Kemal, “Cracks occur within government over Iran,” Today’s Zaman, 16
November 2011. Available at: http://www.todayzaman.com/columnistDetail_
getNewsByItemId.action?newsId=263065

Prevent and Defend: Threat Perceptions and Iran’s Defence Policy


73. Major General Rahim Safavi, in a recent interview with Arabic-language satellite channel Al-Alam issued a clear warning to the potential aggressors that: “in case of an attack by Israel, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza will also join the fighting”. To demonstrate the IRGC’s vigilance, he added that Iranians are fully aware of IDF’s “joint exercises with NATO in the Mediterranean Sea and the joint drill with Italy, which focused on long flights.” See: “Leader’s Top Military Aide Warns Israel of Rocket Rain,” Fars News Agency, 24 November 2011. Available at: http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007274711.

