

Caught between bombing Iran and an Iranian bomb

By Philip Stephens

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John McCain framed the dilemma during the 2008 US presidential election campaign. The only thing worse than war with Iran, the senator postulated, would be a nuclear-armed Iran. Barack Obama took another view and went on to win the White House. He may yet find it impossible to sidestep the choice posed by his opponent.

Some things have moved in the right direction during the intervening couple of years. The uprising on the streets that greeted Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad's **fraudulent re-election** showed his regime to be more vulnerable than many had imagined.

The United Nations has imposed **tighter sanctions** in response to Iran's nuclear programme. Taken with unilateral measures introduced by the US and European Union, the sanctions are making themselves felt. The Iranian economy is looking ever more rocky. After this latest of six UN Security Council resolutions, Iran has **agreed to return to negotiations**.

With Mr Obama holding out a plausible offer to normalise relations with Tehran, Russia and, to a lesser degree, China have begun to share some of the west's exasperation. Moscow has **cancelled an agreement** to sell Iran sophisticated air defence systems. Tehran's enrichment programme has meanwhile lagged behind earlier expectations.

The hope is that Mr McCain's binary choice can be avoided. Through a combination of sticks and carrots, Iran might be persuaded to trade its nuclear ambitions for a return to the community of nations. The chances still seem slim. The best a high-ranking US official will offer is that a deal is "not impossible".

I caught this mood during two days of discussions between a diverse group of mostly European and American experts assembled in **Berlin at the invitation of the Aspen European Strategy Forum**.

The message I took from the policymakers, diplomats, intelligence types and physicists was depressing in almost every dimension. Iran wants the bomb; and nothing that the west has done thus far is likely to persuade it otherwise.

The experts were far from agreed on how best to respond. Some backed military force ranging from naval blockades to the bombing of nuclear sites; others put more faith in diplomacy; others still thought it was time to think ahead to containment and deterrence. What struck me, though, was that hawks and doves alike mostly shared the same view of where we are.

Iran is developing a nuclear weapons capability. It remains open as to whether it has taken a strategic decision to build one or, more likely, several weapons. It might yet be content to become a so-called threshold state. But, as the reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency indicate, the programme does not make sense as a civilian enterprise.

The Iranians are not there yet. There are differences between intelligence agencies as to how long it will take to turn the uranium being enriched at Natanz into sufficient fissile material. But, adding in the need to master warhead technology, most estimates range from a minimum of two to more likely three or four years.

Even before recent speculation that the [Stuxnet computer worm](#) had been aimed at Iran, sanctions and clandestine sabotage operations had had notable successes in disrupting the country's nuclear installations.

Israel is not as sanguine as others about the timeline. Given the threat, it cannot afford to be. Israeli experts point to the possibility of more concealed nuclear sites, raise questions about a new generation of enrichment centrifuges and worry about Iran's access to spent fuel from the Bushehr nuclear reactor.

Diplomacy and sanctions have thus far achieved pretty much nothing as far as Iran's intent is concerned. There have been moments when Tehran seemed ready to negotiate seriously, most notably after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and, perhaps, last year in Geneva.

More recently, it has been shaken by Beijing's and Moscow's backing of new sanctions. But as of now, there are precious few signs of a change in fundamental intent. Russia and China do not want a nuclear Iran, but will go only so far to forestall it.

Within Iran, the nuclear programme is widely seen as in the national interest. In this analysis, possession of the bomb would deter aggression from the US, mark out Iran as a regional leader and alter the balance of power with the west. Iranian leaders have neither forgotten nor forgiven US-led support for Saddam Hussein during the Iraq-Iran war. Sanctions meanwhile play to Mr Ahmadi-Nejad's narrative of a nation victimised by the west.

Were Israel, the US or both to attack the nuclear sites, they would probably be on their own. One or two European (and Arab) governments might privately cheer, but most weigh the risks of conflict with another Muslim state as too high.

Yet if Tehran does succeed in its ambition, it will probably start a nuclear race in one of the world's most volatile regions. The [pressures on Arab states to follow suit](#) – Saudi Arabia and Egypt spring first to mind – would be intense. Turkey would have to consider whether to cross the nuclear threshold.

Proliferation in the Middle East would signal in turn the end of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. John F. Kennedy's nightmare of a world held in terror by the threat of nuclear conflagration would come a big step closer.

The deterrence that prevented the cold from becoming a hot war could not be guaranteed to prevent the use of nuclear weapons in a proliferated world. The promise of mutually assured destruction during that era ensured that neither side could secure an advantage with a first strike that outweighed the cost it would face from retaliation.

In a world in which a larger number of potential adversaries had smaller numbers of weapons, the same calculation would not be assured. The risks of pre-emptive nuclear war – or indeed of simple miscalculation – would be high.

Readers who have persevered this far will have realised that this is not a column offering easy answers or prescriptions. I am not sure there are any. To my mind, the case both for stronger sanctions and for bolder US-led diplomacy speaks for itself – but carries no guarantee of success.

Mr McCain, I think, was wrong in suggesting that bombing Iran could provide an answer; but he was right to suggest that if Iran gets the bomb, the Middle East and the world will be a much more dangerous place.