

Book Review

Arun Vishwanathan and Rajaram Nagappa (Eds.), **Troubling Tehran: Reflections on Geopolitics**, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2013, 139 pp., Rs 895, ISBN 978-81-8274-723-4

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The ever dynamic nuclear conundrum of Iran has continued to hog the limelight. Numerous suggestions emanating from varied quarters about how to manage the issue have dominated the ongoing international discourse. However, there is no unanimity on how to cope with the current situation and the impending future.

Surprisingly, in the Indian context, where Iran's importance is undeniable, the debates have remained limited and incomprehensive. *Troubling Tehran* is a book that seeks to address this lacuna and trigger an Indian cogitation on Iran and the prognosis. The Western world's usual approach towards Iran tends to divide the world along the lines of 'with us' or 'against us'. Despite a degree of US-Iranian rapprochement in the recent months, India seems to be in an uncomfortable position, grappling with Western pressure and conceding to periodic calls for sanctions, lowering dependence on Iranian oil and so on. The book, edited by Arun Vishwanathan and Rajaram Nagappa, has managed to focus on both policy-oriented and technical aspects of the Iranian nuclear programme and relevant issues.

Troubling Tehran rightly brings out the core issue, i.e. the 'lack of trust' between the West and Tehran, and the geo-strategic dilemma that countries such as India, China and Russia face. While the Iranian threat remains pertinent for Washington and its allies, New Delhi, Moscow and Beijing have enjoyed a relatively conducive relationship with Tehran comprising defence and technical cooperation. The book delves into the history of the Iranian programme, which can be traced to the pre-Islamic revolution era under Shah Reza Pahlavi. The idea of embarking on a nuclear weapons programme took hold under the Shah's regime in the mid-1970s but was not regarded as an urgent priority. Iran's nuclear activities, which were supported by the West in the initial years, witnessed a sudden death with the 1979 Islamic revolution. Subsequently, the long drawn out Iran–Iraq war immensely impacted the minds of the Iranian political leadership. Faced with a US-led arms embargo (post-revolution), Tehran had to fend for itself. Throughout the war, Iran was vulnerable to 'chemical weapons and Scud-type missile attacks from Iraq' (p. 23). It was during this time that Iranians realised the importance of having a credible deterrent force of its own.

The changing geopolitical situation (the Iran–Iraq war, Israel's nuclear capability, the US attitude towards North Korea, etc.) also motivated Iran to take the nuclear route. These developments are well assessed within the conceptual framework of the book dealing with the *willingness* and *opportunity* to acquire weapons. The Iranian advancements in nuclear technology have consternated many world capitals and sanctions have not managed to dissuade Iran. Instead, Iran has been convinced of

the indispensability of nuclear weapons against an external attack. As pointed out by the authors, it is not the opportunities that have stopped Iran from going nuclear, but the intentions.

One cannot help but realise that the international debate is crafted and dominated by the US. The likes of India, China and Russia are being pressurised to 'toe the US line'. Clearly, it is the national interests of the US and its allies that guide the anti-Iran agenda. Had the US continued to be on friendly terms with Iran, it would have accepted Iran's nuclear pursuit, as was the case with Israel. These double standards became conspicuous recently when the US (along with Canada) objected to Iran chairing the United Nations (UN) Conference on Disarmament (CD). When Israel previously chaired the same conference, the US displayed no reservations. Interestingly, even when North Korea assumed the chairmanship in 2011, Washington chose 'not to make a big deal', as they saw it as 'a relatively low-level and inconsequential event' while Canada boycotted the same. The previously inconsequential events have now assumed greater importance when applied to the Iranian case. Such instances illustrate that the US stand on Iran's nuclear programme has its roots set in its acrimony towards the country and not in the larger issue of non-proliferation or world welfare.

Currently, the proposed options to handle Tehran range from diplomatic talks to sanctions and possibly a military strike. Undoubtedly, advocates of a military strike on Iranian facilities seem to be championing an imprudent option without much consideration for the inevitable results. If Iran is attacked by Israel (with or without US backing), it will culminate in a larger war, engulfing many other countries. Also, it would be difficult to meet the objective solely with air strikes and the adversaries would be forced to put boots on the ground. The ensuing instability in an already precarious region would exacerbate problems for Israel and the Western powers. Furthermore, the US lacks domestic and international support for any such misadventure after the consequential instability in Iraq post-US invasion under a false pretext, their near-failure in Afghanistan and the recent imbroglio in Libya, Syria and so on.

Iran is not Afghanistan or Iraq, which would easily succumb under military pressure. Iran has the option of choking the Straits of Hormuz and hampering the international oil supply. The book's comprehensive description of Iran's military and asymmetric warfare capabilities substantiates the capacity to undertake such a move. However, despite Iran's capability and will to block the straits to deter or pressurise other powers, it would remain as the last option lest it should invite more serious economic and politico-military repercussions for itself.

Iran's technical and scientific prowess is another aspect that cannot be ignored. Even though Iran's science and technology capabilities are strong and impressive, and do not impede the option of 'going nuclear', aspects such as laser isotope separation techniques and limited heavy water resources do point to some retardation factors, which can be harnessed further.

In their chapter, entitled 'Iran's Missile Capabilities', Rajaram Nagappa and S. Chandrashekar offer a detailed picture of Iran's threat perceptions, which guide the programme and its potency. Apart from developing its missiles to counter the US, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, it is the Israeli threat that remains the prime focus in the Iranian psyche. Iran possesses missiles such as Shahab-3 and Ghadr that can reach Israel (when launched from the western region of the country) and the road mobile Sejil which is capable of reaching Eastern Europe (when launched from Iran's western

region). Such capability may gift Iran some degree of deterrence against the US and EU. However, targeting the US directly is not a possibility in the current or near future.

The reflections on geopolitics are best illustrated by the Iranian scholar Masoud Imami Kalesar. He proffers various angles to the debate, giving the book a much-needed overarching exposition. A deeper probe into issues and similar facets could have further enriched the deliberations. Moreover, the book tends to miss out some non-oil issues such as the 2005 India-Iran Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) agreement wherein Iran was to supply India with five million tons of LNG per annum over 25 years, but the deal was cancelled due to India's vote against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), under US pressure. Also, India's investments in the Chabahar port, pipeline deals that are in a quandary, access to Afghanistan and Central Asia through Iran, and Indo-Iran cooperation with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance post 2014 are among other aspects that could have been included in greater detail in the book.

India is working towards lowering its dependence on Iranian oil, albeit slowly, but it will remain difficult to overlook the geo-strategic importance that Iran offers. As the US withdrawal from Afghanistan nears, Beijing and Islamabad are collaborating to attain a stronghold, which implies that India will be sidelined. History is witness to fortified India-Iran equations during the Taliban regime and in that period the Iranian connection remained pivotal. Iran's interest in India cannot be taken for granted. Its long border with Afghanistan and historical links can be leveraged effectively to make the situation conducive for India. It would be a diplomatic failure on India's part if Iran falls under Chinese influence, like most other South Asian countries. In light of these possibilities, India needs to balance its policy vis-à-vis Iran and the West in a manner that does not leave Iran alienated. Despite the US pressure that compelled the Manmohan administration to vote against Iran at the IAEA, diversified oil sources and hampered the negotiation of the pipeline, New Delhi can start afresh, formulate a clear-cut strategy and mend its fluctuating relations with Tehran. It is in India's interest to maintain relations with Iran and not remain convinced that historical and people-to-people relations will guarantee good relations in the coming time.

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