

Policy Watch: What if Iran acquires nukes?

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What would happen if Iran announced that it had acquired nuclear weapons just before the 2008 U.S. presidential elections? To try and find out, I ran a role-playing game with this scenario in my "War on Terrorism" class Monday at George Mason University.

The class was divided into several groups: Americans, Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, Israelis, Saudis and the U.N. Security Council's permanent and non-permanent members. The American team included President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the presumed Democratic and Republican presidential nominees -- Barack Obama and Rudy Giuliani. The Iranian team included Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and former President Mohammad Khatami, among others. The Iraqi team included Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, President Jalal Talabani, Mahdi Army leader Moqtada Sadr, Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, the head of al-Qaida in Iraq, and a powerful Sunni tribal leader whom we dubbed "Shaykh X."

There were several gender reversals in the game: President Ahmadinejad and the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, among others, were played by female students, while the role of Condi Rice was played by a male student.

The game began with President Ahmadinejad announcing that Iran now had nuclear weapons. The Bush administration publicly called for a diplomatic solution to this crisis but secretly gave the go-ahead for an Israeli pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear sites. While most of the targets were indeed destroyed, part of the Iranian nuclear arsenal remained intact. Further, it soon became known that the Bush administration had approved the Israeli attack.

A furor instantly arose against the United States. Both Saudi Arabia and Russia announced a cutoff in oil sales to the United States. Iran, though, did not retaliate against either Israel or the United States. Instead, Tehran called for humanitarian assistance from other countries to help its citizens recover from American and Israeli "aggression." The effect of this was to gain sympathy for Iran among other countries while further isolating the United States.

In the meantime, divisions in Iraq increased. Al-Qaida in Iraq succeeded in assassinating a senior figure in the elected Iraqi government (it's best not to say which one).

I then interrupted the game for the November 2008 U.S. presidential elections. Everyone was declared to be an American and asked to vote. By a narrow majority, Obama won. The time was then immediately advanced to January 2009 when he took office. One of his first acts was to announce the beginning of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq. He also criticized the Israeli attack on Iran and called for negotiations -- a move that helped restore U.S. ties with other countries. (As a result of pressure from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and AIPAC, though, he reiterated America's commit to defend Israel.)

Anticipating an American departure and fearing a threat from Iraqi Sunnis backed by Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi Shiites turned to Iran for support. The student playing al-Qaida in Iraq, though, sensed what was about to happen and warned that she would attack any Muslim who negotiated with the United States. This, however, became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: increasingly fearful either of al-Qaida in Iraq or just chaos in Iraq, other countries

and actors -- including Russia, Shaykh X and even Iran -- sought to cooperate with the United States.

Further, they did this not out of any sense of idealism or enthusiasm for Obama but as a practical means of furthering their own interests. The game ended with the acceptance by the Obama administration of Iran as a nuclear state, an Iranian-American rapprochement and generally improved U.S. relations with other countries.

Is this a realistic outcome to the crisis that would certainly result from Iran announcing that it had acquired nuclear weapons? The class debated this hotly after the game ended. Many thought that things would not end like this. However, the Iranian team (played mainly by Muslim -- but not Iranian -- students) argued that their aim all along was to gain American respect, and so they took the risk of looking weak in front of other Muslims by deciding not to retaliate against the Israeli attack.

The student who played President Obama argued that once Iran had acquired nuclear weapons, he wasn't willing to risk World War III in a futile effort to deprive Tehran of them. The United States previously acquiesced to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union, China, India and Pakistan. No matter how much Washington does not want Tehran to acquire nuclear weapons, the United States will also have little choice but to accept the situation if Iran does.

How accurately my class's role-playing game predicts what would happen if Iran acquired nuclear weapons cannot be judged unless and until this actually occurs. What the game suggests, though, is that America's relations with other countries in such a crisis will be strongly affected by whether America has a president who cares about whether other governments approve of American policies.

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