

# IRAN'S CALCULATED RISK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

In this March 30, 2005 picture, the Iranian nuclear research centre of Natanz, is pictured 270 km south of Tehran. | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

When the P5+1 nations (China, France, Russia, the U.K. and the U.S., plus Germany) reached an agreement with Iran in 2015 to scuttle the country's nuclear programme, it was expected that the agreement would lead to a new beginning in West Asia. However, this did not happen.

The Barack Obama administration's calculation was that denying Iran a path to the bomb was in the best interest of everyone, including Iran's rivals in the region. Washington saw Iran's nuclear programme, which was at an advanced stage in 2015, as a national security problem and tackled it via diplomacy.

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But Iran's regional rivals, mainly Israel and Saudi Arabia, who are also America's allies, saw the Iran problem differently. For them, Iran's nuclear programme was not the problem but was part of the larger geopolitical challenges Iran posed. The problem was Iran itself: Tehran's influence across West Asia, its backing for non-state militias, and its ambition to emerge as a dominant pillar in the region based on the political heft of the Shia community. Mr. Obama's nuclear deal cut off the path to the bomb, but by lifting sanctions, he allowed Iran to move towards claiming its natural economic and political might. This upset the Israelis and the Saudis.

The Donald Trump administration took an entirely different line towards Iran. It pulled the U.S. out of the nuclear deal, despite United Nations certification that Iran was compliant with its terms, and reimposed sanctions on Tehran. In practical terms, Mr. Trump's approach towards Iran had aligned with that of Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Trump years gave Israel a window of opportunity to step up its covert and overt operations. In 2018, Israeli spies carried out a daring mission at a warehouse inside Iran and stole thousands of documents related to Iran's nuclear programme. Iranian nuclear scientists came under attacks. In Syria, where Iran has deployed militias backing the government of Bashar al-Assad, Israel continued to bomb Iranian targets.

But now, in the twilight months of the Trump administration, President-elect Joe Biden has promised to take the U.S. back to the nuclear deal — with more riders. There is a possibility that Mr. Biden, who was the Vice President of the administration that originally signed the deal, could zero in on the nuclear programme, like Mr. Obama did, and leave the regional issues to the regional players to settle.

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It was against this background Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a top Iranian nuclear physicist, was assassinated on November 27 on the outskirts of Tehran. Israel has been blamed for the attack, an allegation that Tel Aviv has not denied. It is not difficult to see Israel's motives. It wants to set back Iran's nuclear programme by taking out a prominent scientist and scuttle the possible revival of the nuclear deal. The attack has put Iran in a spot. If it does not retaliate, it shows that Iran's deterrence is getting weaker, which could trigger more such attacks from its rivals. If it retaliates, it could escalate the conflict, giving the outgoing Trump administration and a crisis-hit

Benjamin Netanyahu government reasons to launch heavier strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities, closing off the diplomatic path.

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Iran seems to have opted for the less risky option. Instead of walking into the trap of provocation, its Parliament passed a Bill that obliges the government to enrich uranium to a higher level, from less than 5% now to 20%, which is a technical step away from the weapons-grade level of 90% — and stop access for UN inspectors to the country's top nuclear facilities in two months if sanctions relief is not given. Within two months, Mr. Biden will be in the White House. So, Iran is taking a calculated risk by enhancing its nuclear programme, which can be reversed if talks are revived. But it is leaving the Israel problem unaddressed, for now. Israel wants Iran to be contained, not just Iran's nuclear programme. This leaves the region vulnerable to a prolonged crisis.

*stanly. johnny@thehindu.co.in*

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