

The Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action--The Iran Deal: Solution to a Problem That Never Was

Written by John Hallam

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HUMAN SURVIVAL PROJECT PEOPLE FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

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The “real” problem is Israel's real 80-200 warheads, potential Saudi proliferation – and the 'end of the world' problem: the same old US/Russia potential apocalypse that has been waiting in the wings since the early 1960s and hasn't gone away. Iran as a real problem just doesn't rate, notwithstanding the blowviating and frothing of US tea- party republicans.

(vide Senator Ted Cruz, who yesterday said that the Iran deal could lead to 'tens of millions of Americans' dying. This is astonishing rubbish.)

An inordinate amount of time, brain-space, and diplomatic capital has been invested in trying to 'prevent' Iran from doing something that according to the Iranians, and according to both US and Israeli intelligence reports from at least 2007, they either never intended to do, or backed off from doing in 2003.

In the meantime the attention of just about everyone from the highest echelons of the diplomatic community to the disarmament NGO community, (including the authors of this) to Iranians themselves not to mention US congresspeople has been transfixed by the progress or otherwise of the Iran/P5 plus Germany negotiations down to the finest details of IAEA inspection procedures for centrifuges and the Iranian nuclear program itself.

Yet other far more real apocalypses wait in the wings, attention sucked from them by the obsession with a negotiation to end a nuclear weapons program that the Iranians themselves claim never ever existed, and that Western intelligence agencies (CIA and Mossad) say has not existed since 2003.

Western governments deal with the Iranian nuclear issue as if it was an 'existential threat' to the world as a whole when, as a real global threat, it just doesn't register. Yet all-too-real global nuclear threats, including ones with civilization-ending and even species-ending potential, we manage to ignore as elephants in the room that we refuse to see in spite of their often very loud trumpeting.

In order of importance these neglected existential nuclear issues are:

- 1) The continued existence of massive US and Russian nuclear arsenals that account for some 90% of all the 17,000 “online” nuclear weapons that exist, and whose nuclear postures mean that just under 1000 land-based warheads each can be launched in (on the Russian side, for example) 'a few dozens of seconds'. Much larger numbers of SLBMs can be launched in a few more minutes by both sides.

This particular threat is, of course, the real civilization-ending, species-ending, one. The use of a largish portion of these weapons would bring about the deaths of up to 1-2 billion

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(depending on targeting) in as short a time as an hour and a half. The burning of the world's largest cities would then loft up to 180 million tonnes of very black carbon into the upper stratosphere, bringing about conditions as cold as or colder than the last ice age, for a number of decades.

Over the decades since the 1960s a series of operational 'glitches' has come close to bringing about the apocalypse on a worryingly large number of occasions that we know about. Perhaps the most famous (because there is a film about it and a real live hero) is Colonel Stan Petrov's brush with doomsday on September 26, 1983. Colonel Petrov reported his computer alert as a false alarm, saving civilization. However the world nearly ended twice that year, since in November the Able Archer nuclear exercise nearly brought about a nuclear exchange. From the 60s to the 80s a series of alarming glitches are known to have taken place in which the fate of civilization and humans all too often depended on the right judgement of a single individual. After 1985, in the US, the record is classified.

Most recently, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has judged the likelihood of a civilization-ending nuclear catastrophe to be such that they have moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock from 5 minutes to 3 minutes to 'midnight'. (A process involving committees of Nobel prizewinners) This is partly in light of nuclear threats made over the Ukraine crisis. Still more recently, the former commander of US nuclear forces, General Cartwright (whom the Author met at the NPT Review Conference in New York), and his erstwhile Russian opposite number, General Vladimir Dvorkin, wrote a joint letter to the US and Russian Governments urging that US and Russian nuclear forces be taken off high alert in order to avert a potential catastrophe. The small attention the letter received was overshadowed by attention being given to Iran.

The Russia/US high alert status aggravated by their new standoff in Ukraine is by far the largest and most dangerous nuclear 'elephant' in the room and is the one that receives paradoxically the least attention.

Other 'elephants' include:

2) The possibility of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan. At current arsenal levels of around 120 weapons each an India-Pakistani nuclear war would involve up to 200 warheads largely used to destroy cities (and maybe in the early stages troop and tank concentrations), in the Indian subcontinent. India also has ambitions, not quite yet realizable, to be able to target China with its longer-range missiles, making a three-cornered nuclear face-off.

Climate-modeling simulations done for an India-Pakistan conflagration involving as few as 100 (not the more probable 200) Hiroshima-sized warheads give a possible immediate body count of up to 100 million (in my opinion far too low an estimate), and a delayed climatic impact of global famine affecting crop yields in the US, China, Ukraine, Russia, and elsewhere around the world that could lead to the death of between 1-2 billion human beings from famine in the decade following.

This is a slightly more modest elephant than the US/Russia one, (which is maybe more of a

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wooly mammoth), but two billion famine deaths is hardly something that can be ignored. It is still stakes astronomically greater than anything that can be contemplated in the worst Middle East nightmare, even had the Iranians developed a real nuclear weapons program—which, as we saw, they never seriously tried to do.

But there are genuine, real, Middle East nuclear threats.

It's just that they rarely get talked about and the subject is quickly diverted to the non-problem of Iran.

3) These are, of course, the all-too-real nuclear arsenal of Israel, with its 80-200 weapons, weapons whose existence is never fully admitted beyond a wink and a nod, and the all-too-real and explicit statements by Saudi Arabia that it may 'have to' obtain nuclear weapons.

In fact, Saudi Arabia, a regime far more toxic than Iran's (which has actually some real claims to somewhat free elections – after all, Rouhani did win), is reputed to have bankrolled Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, and rumors swirl either that they have warheads earmarked for them or that they have an option to take delivery of a number of Pakistani warheads should they make the decision to do so. These rumors are of course denied, but it is quite clear – indeed the Saudis themselves have made it abundantly clear – that they are looking at acquiring nuclear weapons far more seriously than Iran ever did. It is our guesstimate that if Saudi Arabia does acquire a nuclear capability it will do so quite independently of whatever Iran does or does not do. The question we would have to look at would then be not whether Iran gets one before the Saudis, but whether Iran would try to get one in response to a Saudi one. (Also whether the US would allow the Saudis to have one.)

This doesn't in the least mean that the consequences of a US Congressional shooting down of the agreement (involving an override of a Presidential veto) would not be serious. Of course they would. And, as Kerry and Obama keep on pointing out, it would then be the US itself that would be left out in the cold as everyone else repaired their relations with Iran. But there are lunatic hardliners on both sides of the US/Iran divide.

What is really (potentially) at stake in the Iran agreement has paradoxically very little to do with nuclear weapons, and much more to do with the possibility at some future stage of a US/Iran rapprochement.

And such a rapprochement would undoubtedly be a good thing, as the Saudi regime decays and becomes yet more toxic, and as ISIS and other lunatic groups continue to threaten not just US interests narrowly defined, but civilized values.

The greater and far more urgent challenge is to ensure that the ultimate global catastrophe – a US/Russia nuclear war, the same apocalypse that has threatened civilization since 1962 – never takes place and is decisively removed from the agenda.

This will first of all involve taking with all seriousness its actual possibility, and then taking the necessary steps – first of all the risk reduction measures outlined by Generals Dvyorkin and

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Cartwright as well as in numerous UN resolutions on operational readiness – and then the measures urged by conference after conference of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, including a global signing up to a nuclear weapons ban and/or convention.

All of the above-mentioned nuclear de-escalation and treaty-building is what truly and urgently needs to happen.

It is in reality far far more important than the joint plan of action that now obsesses everyone. It is indeed, of truly existential importance.

To achieve it, Obama administration and its successors will have to face down extremists in the Congress, and most specifically on the committees that govern US nuclear strategic policy.

Taking on the Iranians will have been so much easier. After all it was/is merely preventing a government who had no plans to obtain a bomb anyway, from obtaining a bomb!