By Lauren Williamson

Iranian nuclear negotiations have been underway again in Geneva between Iranian officials and diplomats from the P5+1 countries. Yet according to Reuters, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad doesn't plan to discuss his country's specific nuclear programme and will be opting instead to chat about nuclear issues generally or other global problems. As Ahmadinejad sees it, the heavy-weight weapons-wielders of the world are about to scold him – again – arguing his country should not play with guns.

It is unlikely that this round of talks will yield a less defiant Iran, as Tehran has been doggedly determined in its nuclear pursuit. This is especially true in light of Sunday's revelation by the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran who claims Iran is now fully capable of producing nuclear fuel. It can now successfully make yellow cake, or uranium powder which, when refined, can become fissile nuclear bomb material.

Currently, Iran is returning to the negotiating table after a 14-month break. But the history of the issue has deep roots. The Institute for Science and International Security says Iran outlined nuclear ambitions in the 1950s, later signing the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – which does allow for the pursuit of peaceful nuclear energy programmes. From the 1980s through the 2000s Iran conducted undeclared nuclear-related activity, violating conditions of the NPT. Instead of pursuing its peaceful programme transparently, as it had agreed, Iran has been shirking it obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). And its non-compliance has resulted in brutal economic sanctions from the international community since 2006.

This is not to say Iran hasn't allowed IAEA inspectors in at all. In fact, the cat-and-mouse game between Iranian officials and inspectors has served a crucial part of Iran's stalling strategy to hinder international monitoring efforts. The IAEA leaders recently said they have been unable to confirm that Iran's intentions are fully peaceful and have noted cooperation difficulties with Iranian authorities who have hidden nuclear testing sites and failed to report various activities. The opacity of Iran's efforts raises concern that the country is, in fact, building nuclear bombs. Even the US National Intelligence Estimate says weapons design and weaponisation plans have been discovered in Iran.

Manipulating incentives and deterrents lie at the heart of diplomatic negotiations, so as trite as it seems to discuss "sticks and carrots" it is necessary to look at what motivates the players of the Iranian nuclear negotiations.

Iran sits just south of the Caspian Sea and north of the Persian Gulf, centrally strategic to the greater Middle East region. It's surrounded by heavy US military presence and is flanked on either side by brutal and enduring warfare. The issues in Iraq continue on its western border; the Afghanistan counter insurgency efforts are on its east. Nearby nuclear neighbours not

signed to the NPT include Pakistan and India, plus the unconfirmed possibility of a nuclear-armed Israel. Iran operates politically on a Shiite ideology and is quite threatened by overtly Zionist or Sunni Muslim regimes. Iran has sound reasons to feel threatened and to want to flex its military might by acquiring nuclear technology.
Additionally, Iran has been pressured by economic sanctions which restrict investments, banking, and the export/import of oil and other chemicals. To compensate, the government initiated a large subsidy programme, which artificially cheapened the cost of goods for the Iranian public. As Iranian officials are now eliminating the subsidies, economists predict an across-the-board price hike in the cost of food and other essentials, thus delivering another blow to the Iranian economy. Bloomberg news reports that the sanctions have hindered Iran's nuclear pursuits, and the country is now losing an estimated $50-60 billion worth of energy investments. But these optimistic points overlook a simple fact: a pressured economy gives leaders even more justification to pursue the nuclear programme for acquiring cheap energy for its poverty-stricken people.

As for negotiating 'carrots', the international community could choose to ease up on sanctions as an enticement. But this would send a public message that Iran's non-compliance is acceptable and would damage the legitimacy of international bodies, chiefly the IAEA. Stronger countries could offer aid dollars and economic incentives to Iran in exchange for NPT compliance. However Tehran would likely scoff at such offers, unless the deals were made covertly, as Iran places a lot of value in projecting an image of independence and self-sufficiency.

If Iran does sense that its national safety is on the line due to perceived hostilities from its neighbours, another bargaining chip might be to exchange security equipment, personnel and training for Iranian acquiescence to strict nuclear monitoring. But such an incentive could not come from the US, lest it be seen as betraying other allies in the region or be accused of arming an oppressive ultra-conservative regime that commits human rights abuses against its own people, as Amnesty International and other watchdog agencies report.

There is, less diplomatically, the option of force. But it would be difficult to find jus ad bellum for a military invasion of Iran. It would be even harder to sell such action as a vindication of a violated right, a self-defensive act, or a humanitarian effort. It would be unlikely to gain UN Security Council approval, especially as China and Russia have a strong interest in keeping nearby Iran stable.

The US could follow its precedent for military interventions sans Security Council approval, as was the case for the Clinton administration's actions in Serbia or Bush's invasion in Iraq. Yet if a forceful intervention in Iran were fruitless, akin to the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the war-weary US public would be outraged. US authorities would lose more international credibility and it could incite deep political upset within the nation. As recorded by The Project on Defense Alternatives, Charles Knight's 2001 speech explains how unilateralism damages the monitoring regime laid out by the NPT, and US-initiated interventions "will contribute, intentionally or not, to a global insecurity dynamic tending to stimulate remilitarization and repolarization."

Then how does the international community proceed with Iranian nuclear negotiations? As reported by AFP, one of Ahmadinejad's top aids said last week that the West needs to "stop fooling themselves" because the sanctions have failed. What the sanctions have succeeded at though is creating an Iranian narrative that blames the West – particularly the US – for the poverty and economic woes facing the country, the reason underpinning Iran's underdog status.

Unfortunately, the most fragile civilians in Iran, not the political elite, are the ones who are most harmed by economic sanctions. And while the international community may hope continued sanctions will prompt Iran to ultimately relent, this is also unlikely. Iranian officials give no indication of abandoning uranium enrichment efforts. Iran's Chief of Staff verifies this, saying: "The nuclear issue is a symbol of Iranians' resistance." It is far more likely Iran would crumble into civil war due to economic turmoil before reneging on its nuclear programme, a development that could also easily be blamed on the West. Or substantial civil unrest could create an environment in Iran where nuclear capabilities might truly fall into the wrong hands.

Another recent development that adds to this "West as enemy" narrative is the fact that an Iranian intelligence minister claims the CIA and MI6 are behind the bombing attacks against two prominent nuclear scientists. These narratives propagate the perception of the West as Iran's most loathed enemy. Such perceptions not only complicate present negotiation efforts, they will also reap unpleasant dividends in future relations with the country.

It is logical that the P5+1 countries would hope to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and energy knowledge. But knowledge is a resource that cannot be sanctioned. One recent US proposal created a nuclear fuel sharing process that would allow nations to engage in the benefits of peaceful nuclear energy without actually mastering the knowledge behind it. Of course Iran rejected it. Officials called it an attempted monopoly on science and technology. If the curiosity for nuclear information exists in Iran, then academics and intellectuals will eventually find their way to the answers – sanctions or not.

Nuclear weapons are an unfortunate but unavoidable aspect of present-day international politics. Negotiations are a necessary diplomatic endeavour, even if they are perhaps more of a delay tactic than an immediate measure to draw down Iran's uranium stockpile. However, negotiators must consider the inevitability of certain realities and therefore exert greater effort ensuring Iran doesn't have the motivation to apply weaponised nuclear knowledge in a way that might devastate those it deems as enemies.

Additional UK Defence Forum research on Iran's nuclear programme can be accessed here .