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On Deterring Iran

Why it's complicated, why it matters

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As a determined Tehran pursues a nuclear-weapons capability, and develops and deploys increasingly long-range ballistic missiles, a debate on the prospective role of deterrence begins to take shape. On one side is the assertion that Iranian leaders are “rational”; on the other, the fear that, when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons, they may not be. Their frequent calls for the destruction of Israel raise particular concerns in this regard.

In both policy and academic debates about deterrence, to label leaderships rational is often tantamount to declaring them deterrable. And if a leadership is deemed irrational, this is a coded way of saying that it likely cannot be deterred. But while equating “rational” with “deterrable” may make for a convenient shorthand, it is not particularly helpful in determining whether the Iranian leadership, or any other regime, is deterrable in fact.

It is a common assumption that a nuclear-armed Iran would not be a nightmare scenario because, while Iranian leaders may be eccentric, they are not suicidal. In this narrative, their fear of the consequences would deter them from using nuclear weapons or engaging in other severe provocations likely to incite Western retaliation.

This view is often backed up by the observation that even Stalin and Mao, who were considered highly eccentric, ultimately proved to be rational and deterrable. There is no reason to believe that Iran’s leaders are any more eccentric, the argument goes. Even their pursuit of nuclear weapons is explained on the basis of a rational calculation: Such weapons would give Iran both prestige and a means of deterring attacks from the West.

Confidence that Iranian leaders are rational does not directly translate into acquiescence to Iran’s goal of obtaining nuclear weapons. But, according to those who hold this view, the United States should be careful not to overreact to Iran’s nuclear program. In particular, it should avoid the use of military force. Since a nuclear-armed Iran could be deterred, why risk the consequences of using force — Iranian-sponsored acts of terror, for example, or missile attacks on U.S. military forces and U.S. allies in the region, or economic disruptions in the oil market?

The alternative narrative is that Iranian leaders have such eccentric views that they are effectively irrational. If Iranian leaders lack the good sense to fear widespread devastation and their own destruction, they might undertake extreme provocations, even in the face of possible nuclear retaliation. This description of Iranian decision-making generally accompanies the conclusion that the United States should be prepared to take great risks — and to use military force, if necessary — to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

The typical presumption is that any state leader sound enough to be in a position of authority must be rational, and that rational leaders can be counted on to calculate the costs of nuclear war properly. This presumption yields the comforting conclusion that deterrence will always work. It is additionally comforting in its suggestion that the United States is under little pressure to take military action, since its nuclear and conventional superiority make deterrence relatively easy. During the Cold War, this logic was one reason for the U.S. decision to forgo most strategic defenses against the Soviet nuclear threat. Why undertake the challenge of defending the American population when deterrence alone would suffice?

That Cold War line of thought can be seen in contemporary commentary on Iran and other rogue states. To wit, Iranian leaders are rational or they could not function at the level required to lead a state, and so they will be deterrable even if they acquire nuclear arms.

It is true that leaders are unlikely to be predictably deterrable if they are irrational in the sense that they suffer from a breakdown of cognition and display symptoms such as hallucinations. If Iranian leaders are so afflicted, or are eccentric enough to challenge the boundaries of reason, then the prudent course for the United States is to make deterrence, by means of both nuclear and conventional capabilities, as effective as possible, and to prepare seriously for the possibility of its failure. To do so, the U.S. should also strengthen its defensive capabilities and those of its allies, particularly its capabilities against the primary Iranian means of attack: missiles. These steps may be a hard sell in the context of austere U.S. defense budgets and the administration's defense "pivot" toward Asia.

The alternative is to hope that Iranian leaders will be reliably deterrable or that they will decide to forgo nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, high confidence in either hope is unwarranted. We should recognize that even leaders who do not suffer from psychopathologies are often not predictably deterrable. Deterrence is a complex process that can fail for a variety of reasons. Leaders may have overriding goals — political, military, religious, ideological, or even personal — that compel them to take high-risk actions. And they may recognize the risks of provoking a powerful opponent but consider the risks of not acting to be even greater.

History offers many occasions on which deterrence failed when it was expected to work. For example, in 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a massive armored attack against Israel, even though Israel was widely suspected of having nuclear weapons. Henry Kissinger, secretary of state at the time, later said that the U.S. was surprised by the attack because no one considered Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat to be so irrational. But Sadat had powerful reasons for launching the war despite the apparent risks. Specifically, he believed the restoration of Egyptian honor following earlier losses to Israel demanded taking such action, and he hoped thereby to compel superpower intervention that would move Israel toward concessions in its dealings with Egypt. It is possible to question Sadat's prudence in launching the attack for these reasons, but not his rationality. Rationality held, but deterrence failed.

Earlier, during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the Cuban leadership lobbied hard for a Soviet nuclear strike from Cuba against the United States, according to Soviet leaders. The Cuban leaders apparently perceived a moment when socialism could attack capitalism and prevail, despite the obvious risks that such an attack would pose to Cuba and the world. Fortunately, the Soviet leadership calculated the risks and costs differently, as indicated by the response of Soviet vice premier Anastas Mikoyan. "We see your willingness to die beautifully," he said, "but we do not believe it is worth dying beautifully."

What motivations, hidden or explicit, might inspire Iranian leaders to make high-risk decisions? One possibility is their oft-expressed goal of eliminating Israel. Some have suggested that they may even be eager for the chaos and martyrdom that their use of nuclear weapons would produce, because that outcome is consistent with their apocalyptic religious vision of the future. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has publicly expressed his belief that he is supernaturally guided in his decision-making and therefore protected against long odds and high

risks. (Hitler held similar views.) Do we therefore know that Iran's leaders would take high-risk actions? Of course not. Neither, however, do we know with confidence that they would not.

One prediction, however, can be made with some confidence: Iran would consider it less risky to promote its aggressive agenda in the Gulf and beyond if it had nuclear weapons. That agenda includes elevating Iran to the position of regional hegemon. Nuclear weapons would give it security cover as it maneuvered in ways that could lead to an escalation of tensions and outright conflict. This could involve, for example, sponsoring terrorist acts against Israel and other nations, fomenting political unrest in the Middle East, and undercutting the U.S. position in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This conclusion has enormous implications for U.S. policy. It suggests that, if Iran achieves nuclear capability, effective deterrence strategies will be particularly important but also potentially difficult to put into practice.



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During the Cold War, Jimmy Carter's secretary of defense, Harold Brown, concluded that effective deterrence requires a credible threat to what the enemy "considers most important." The application of that conclusion to Iran leads to two fundamental questions. What is it that the Iranian leadership considers most important? And can the United States credibly put it at risk?

There is some evidence that what Iranian leaders hold dearest is the Islamic Republic itself and their autocratic leadership of it. For example, the founding leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, decided in 1988 to accept a ceasefire in his nation's long war with Iraq — a ceasefire that essentially had been available since 1982 — because the war had come to pose a threat to his regime. He did this even though he regarded it as drinking "the cup of poison." In addition, he established as a governing axiom that the supreme religious value is the preservation of the Islamic Republic and by extension revolutionary Islam, and that virtually any act may be condoned if undertaken for that purpose.

Indeed, this *raison d'état* likely underlies Iran's apparent commitment to acquiring nuclear weapons, despite repeated declarations by the U.S. and other powers that such an outcome would be "unacceptable." The regime may believe that nuclear weapons will protect the survival of the Islamic Republic and the leadership's position in it both from external threats and from foreign military support for its democratic opposition, possibly supported by foreign governments. The world's patient and relatively benign treatment of North Korea is likely to have demonstrated to Iranian leaders that nuclear weapons would enable them to hold their opponents at bay, just as the fates of Saddam Hussein and Moammar Qaddafi demonstrated that the cost of challenging the West with only conventional forces can be prohibitively high.

Will the United States be able to establish credible strategies for deterring Iran's leadership? Perhaps, but the policies of the Obama administration with respect to Iran are not encouraging. To date, they likely have reduced the credibility of U.S. deterrence strategies. How so?

A central theme of the administration's national-security policy has been an almost unshakable faith in engagement. President Obama came to office promising an open hand to the mullahs in Tehran. In practice, this has meant that for almost three years the administration opposed — actually opposed — the imposition of effective sanctions on the regime in order not to reduce prospects for nuclear talks. By placing engagement at the center of its Iran policy, the administration has not only failed to achieve its objective, but has also bought time for Tehran to continue work on its nuclear program.

If the sanctions to which Iran is now subject had been imposed earlier, perhaps they would have been more effective. As things stand, they are causing economic pain, but there is no apparent evidence that they are slowing Iran's nuclear program. One can only speculate about what the leadership in Tehran is thinking. Will the sanctions perversely lead to an acceleration of the program now that its completion may be near? Former CIA director Leon Panetta estimated in December 2011 that it would take Iran "about a year" to build a nuclear weapon following a decision to do so. Would it not be rational for Iran's leaders to calculate that, once they have achieved their goal of becoming a nuclear power, the international community would, after a decent interval, forget and forgive, as it has done with India, Pakistan, and other states?

While the Obama administration has asserted that all options are on the table, it has also been explicit in saying that it does not want to threaten or use force. Indeed, former secretary of defense Robert Gates called the use of force "insane." More recently, President Obama has reportedly sought to constrain Israel from threatening or using force. The irony is that the most effective way to improve the prospects for a peaceful diplomatic settlement would be to make it clear to Tehran that force is a credible option. What was the case with Libya in 2003 — that it preferred abandoning its nuclear-weapons program to risking the military strike it believed the United States was prepared to launch against it — is likely the case with Iran today.

In a similarly unhelpful vein, the Obama administration has promoted its vision of "global nuclear zero," according to which the U.S. should take steps toward unilateral nuclear reductions. The argument, unsupported by evidence, is that such measures would rally the international community in support of nonproliferation and, in the process, of sanctions against proliferators. This is expected in turn to serve the cause of keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists. It's all very neat. It's all very logical. But just think about how the international community has responded to the Iranian nuclear challenge, and the conclusion seems inescapable: The proposition is without merit.

The ultimate question is how to effect or encourage political change in Iran. Here, again, we are handicapped by a history of seeking accommodation with the mullahs. In 2009, the U.S. response to protests in the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities was to sit quietly and wait, out of concern that support for the protesters would derail the prospects for engagement with the Iranian government.

We need to devise our policies and adjust our capabilities in a way that will deter and defend against threats to our country and our allies. The underlying problem, the real danger, is when our government pursues that goal in a way that produces effects that are the opposite of what it intends. That is what we did in the aftermath of the First World War, with the promotion of first the Wilsonian League of Nations and then the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928. Both contributed to a failure of deterrence that helped create the conditions that brought about the Second World War. The flaw of those two measures was not in their vision. It was, as George Kennan has argued, in their implementation — in the naivete and wishful thinking that, combined, increased the likelihood of war, through bad policy and self-deluding complacency.

The hope that Iranian leaders will ultimately choose to forgo nuclear weapons, or that they will be reliably deterrable, should not be a source of comparable wishful thinking and complacency today. A realistic assessment can only end in the conclusion that Iran might continue on its path to a nuclear weapon, and that, if so, strengthened U.S. deterrence strategies will be critically important but not foolproof.

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