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A Nuclear Crisis in Search of a Model: Lessons from Iraq, North Korea, Libya, and Syria

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The interim deal signed in Geneva by the P5+1 and Iran is meant only to put "more time on the clock" in order to negotiate a final deal – a comprehensive agreement that will ensure that Iran backs away from its military nuclear ambitions. As the international community embarks on its most difficult proliferation challenge yet, what lessons can be drawn from confrontations with other determined proliferators? What model best applies?

When international focus in mid-2003 turned almost simultaneously to the Iranian and North Korean nuclear crises, diplomacy emerged as the virtually unchallenged strategy for confronting the nuclear aspirations of both determined proliferators. The decision to pursue negotiations rather than military force did not emerge by chance, nor was it inevitable. Rather, it was a deliberate choice that was shaped in large measure by the dynamics surrounding the US invasion of Iraq earlier that year. The US choice to employ military force to confront potential WMD proliferators after 9/11 had met with serious opposition well before the US decision to go to war in Iraq, and was amplified as America prepared for attack. But the final nail on the coffin of the "use-of-force" strategy came after US forces that invaded Iraq failed to find the WMD that were the declared justification for going to war.

The shadow of Iraq loomed large over efforts to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions over the course of the next decade, and had two decidedly negative consequences. First, it severely constrained efforts to establish firm grounds for the existence of a "smoking gun" regarding Iran's military nuclear ambitions. Compounding the already difficult task of presenting evidence of military nuclear activities in an NPT member state – primarily due to the centrality of dual-use technology – was the nagging insistence of skeptics that if Iraq was unfairly accused of WMD capabilities, who is to say Iran is not similarly misjudged? It was only in late 2011, when the full annex on the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program was revealed, that the suspicions were broadly recognized as constituting a virtual smoking gun. By this time, however, crucial years

were wasted on less-than determined efforts to confront Iran. Second, the US military venture in Iraq produced a gun-shy America when it came to Iran; this undermined an important lever of pressure that could have been achieved through credible threats of military consequences for lack of Iranian seriousness at the negotiations table. Unfortunately, every presidential statement that "all options are on the table" was diluted by a US official proclaiming that another war would be a disaster.

Now that negotiations with Iran have produced an interim deal, the North Korean model comes into sharper relief. Negotiations with North Korea over the past two decades produced a number of agreements that were ultimately not upheld by North Korea. The most notable was the deal struck in September 2005 whereby North Korea committed to abandon its nuclear program and pursue nuclear disarmament in return for economic and energy assistance. But the deal never materialized – North Korea tested its first nuclear device the following year, and since then has continued on a path of nuclear defiance despite additional attempts to restart negotiations.

The North Korean model thus demonstrates that when trying to stop a determined proliferator, regardless of whether the approach is negotiations or military force, the challenge is the same: to get the determined proliferator to back away from military aspirations and return to its NPT commitments. As such, it is always a game of compellence.

When military force is chosen, the element of compellence is quite apparent. But it is often overlooked in the case of negotiations, especially when diplomacy is mistakenly couched in the language of "confidence building." But in fact, successful negotiations necessitate an equally forceful approach; to achieve nuclear rollback via negotiations, the international community will have to be armed (in more ways than one) with a considerable degree of leverage. In all scenarios, the determined proliferator is trying to proliferate, and there is no deal that will meet its interests in this regard, unless pressure (military threats and/or economic sanctions) becomes unbearable. Therefore, whatever approach is taken, leverage is the key to success.

For all the differences between the cases of Iran and North Korea, the North Korean model demonstrates clearly what happens when a determined proliferator faces international negotiators that are devoid of any leverage for compelling it to reverse course in the nuclear realm. Once North Korea demonstrated that it is a nuclear state, the military option was rendered null and void. That left only economic pressure, but the specifics of the North Korean case basically neutralized economic leverage as well. Due to Chinese and Russian fears that the collapse of North Korea would spark a massive influx of refugees across their borders, the two powers have been unwilling to risk creating an economic disaster in North Korea. This has engendered the unusual dynamic

whereby North Korea is subjected to sanctions after every case of defying UN Security Council resolutions, but when it returns to the table to negotiate, it normally receives the economic assistance that it seeks – generally in return for meaningless North Korean nuclear promises.

The experience of dealing with North Korea underscores the importance of the economic leverage that the P5+1 finally gained over Iran in 2012, following the set of strong and effective economic and financial sanctions that the US and EU put in place. The military option is also still realistic enough to be on the table seriously. If this leverage is squandered in return for anything less than very significant nuclear concessions by Iran, the Iranian case will very likely begin looking more and more like North Korea, with the international community increasingly powerless to stop it.

Two additional models highlight another important lesson for those trying to negotiate a deal with Iran: Libya (2003) and Syria (2013). The lesson of these two cases is that when pressure succeeds in forcing a state to actually make the decision to reverse course – Libya regarding all WMD, and Syria regarding its chemical weapons – it does not take years to finalize a deal. Indeed, the details can be worked out very quickly, and the process can begin almost immediately. In the Syrian case, for example, no one contends that the rollback is not final because the knowhow to make chemical weapons is still in the minds of Syrian scientists, an argument that has lately been thrown into the Iranian debate. When a state makes a genuine decision to roll back its program, these arguments are irrelevant – they are only raised when that decision has not been taken.

Until Iran makes the strategic decision to reverse course in the nuclear realm, there is little chance that a true and lasting deal will be achieved. Continued pressure is the only key – keeping an eye firmly on the leverage is, therefore, the only hope the P5+1 have to compel Iran to finally make that choice.