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Nuclear Iran? Optimistic Pessimists versus Pessimistic Optimists

Given three options — deterrence, counter-proliferation or non-proliferation — which one has the greatest chance of containing a nuclear-capable Iran? According to Frank Sauer, the choice is clear. Non-proliferation works best.

By Frank Sauer for ISN

The world can be divided into two camps on the topic of nuclear weapons: those who are optimistic about deterrence but pessimistic about non-proliferation and those who are pessimistic about deterrence but optimistic about non-proliferation. As far as Iran is concerned, however, neither of these camps considers the option of relying on deterrence alone – i.e., allowing the country to acquire nuclear weapons – to be a serious one. This implies that either counter-proliferation or non-proliferation measures are required. Although non-proliferation involves a long and tedious process – and is less dramatic and impressive than counter-proliferation-measures such as cyber-attacks – only continued non-proliferation-diplomacy can yield a sustainable solution to the Iran situation. So while the non-proliferation regime is far from perfect, for dealing with nuclear proliferation and cases like Iran we are much better off with it than without it.

Optimistic pessimists and pessimistic optimists

Members of the first camp assume that nuclear deterrence works in preventing the use of nuclear weapons. Despite close calls every once in a while, in the end, they argue, the threat of retaliation in kind and the immense cost of nuclear war will keep the balance of terror intact. They also admit, however, that the same steely, cost-calculating logic that leads the states of the "nuclear club" to refrain from actually using nuclear weapons will continue to compel non-nuclear weapon states to strive for them – because nuclear weapons promise the ultimate security guarantee in a self-help world. Members of camp one are consequently cynical about the prospects for international cooperation in durable non-proliferation regimes. There will always be "cheats," they argue, forcing us to rely on intelligence, law enforcement, military and other counter-proliferation measures instead to discourage unwelcome nuclear aspirants and disrupt their nuclear schemes. In short, members of camp one are optimistic about nuclear deterrence but pessimistic about our ability to sustainably ensure non-proliferation.

The second camp, by contrast, is pessimistic about nuclear deterrence. Who is to say that one day someone might not weigh the costs and benefits differently and opt to use nuclear weapons? Even

worse, nuclear weapons are always in human hands and therefore subject to human error. To members of the second camp, the threat of nuclear war is not merely a bluff for deterrence purposes. It is a real possibility. This means that containing proliferation and reducing the number of nuclear weapons is such an obvious necessity that, in turn, cautious optimism about the feasibility of non-proliferation and even piecemeal nuclear disarmament is warranted. Rather than settling for the repeated rounds of "whack-a-mole" that counter-proliferation efforts resemble, camp two proposes playing "the long game" by seeking legally binding agreements and regimes through confidence-building measures, transparency, inspections, verification systems and compliance mechanisms. Hence members of this camp prefer arms control and disarmament over deterrence and counter-proliferation.

These two camps are obviously caricatures. Few people (if any) would strictly identity with one to the exclusion of the other. Also, nuclear arms control and nuclear deterrence, for instance, are closely intertwined rather than mutually exclusive enterprises. Nevertheless, the camps are useful ideal-types for understanding the range of options for managing the possible spread of nuclear weapons.

Iran: Deterrence, Stuxnet or Diplomacy?

President Rouhani himself has conceded that Iran's behavior in the past provides legitimate cause for concern about the country's nuclear intentions. Indeed, there is a broad consensus (the late Kenneth Waltz aside, who remained alone in taking the deterrence-optimism of camp one to its logical extreme) that relying on deterrence in the case of a nuclear Iran – and its volatile, complicated region – is not desirable.

Accordingly, members of 'camp one' ponder counter-proliferation measures, such as the air-strikes conducted by Israel against the Iraqi reactor construction site at Osirak in 1981 and against the so-called "box on the Euphrates" in Syria in 2007, the al-Kibar site believed to be a "proliferation-prone" Yongbyon-type light-water reactor. The Iranian nuclear program, however, consists of around 30 installations, some of which (such as the Fordow enrichment plant) are buried deeply underground. Conventional munitions cannot destroy such targets. To even reach them, Israeli planes would have to cross Jordanian, Saudi Arabian, Syrian or Iraqi airspace, and it is unclear whether airborne refueling could be provided for a safe return. This means that while airstrikes could potentially stunt the Iranian program for years, they entail tremendous risks, an uncertain chance of success – and utterly unclear consequences. After all, airstrikes would open the proverbial "can of worms" of military action against Iran.

A more subtle approach to counter-proliferation is embodied by Stuxnet, the malware that secretly manipulated the rotating speed of Iranian centrifuges and managed to destroy a good portion of them. On the whole, Stuxnet was a clever means of sabotaging Iran's most likely path to nuclear weapons. It was more sophisticated – and, crucially, more deniable – than an airstrike. Stuxnet was a tailor-made instrument which caused damage in the specific environment (i.e., the Natanz facility) that it was designed for. But Stuxnet too had its downsides. The malware's escape "into the wild" – where it was found on many industrial control systems running the Siemens Step-7 Windows software that it targeted – reveals the ambivalent nature of cyber-attacks and their potential for collateral damage. More importantly, Stuxnet only resulted in a temporary setback for the Iranian enrichment program.

In reaction, 'camp two' proponents of non-proliferation can point to the "joint plan of action" agreed upon in Geneva last November between the P5+1 and Iran. This six-month interim agreement imposes an enrichment limit to reactor-grade of 5 percent, with existing uranium stockpiles that exceed this limit being diluted. It also allows for camera inspections at Iran's nuclear facilities (if only the officially declared ones), and halts the construction of the Arak reactor to prevent plutonium

production through fuel recycling – Iran's other possible route to the bomb. So far, just as with a counter-proliferation tool such as Stuxnet, this agreement has merely slowed down the Iranian nuclear program and forestalled a "breakout" scenario. But while the interim deal is neither comprehensive nor watertight, it is nevertheless a significant step forward.

A perspective, finally

After years of stalemate, the deal that is now in effect has established an important baseline. The P5+1 can be reasonably certain, while negotiations proceed, that Iran is not accelerating its progress toward the bomb, and the threat of renewed sanctions remains at their disposal should negotiations break down. The first round of talks, which ended in Vienna last week, has identified and agreed upon the issues that need to be dealt with in more detail over the upcoming months. Agreement on the joint path towards a solution represents an initial – albeit modest – success.

This newly established framework makes it possible to keep moving towards a more comprehensive agreement that includes IAEA-verification of the peacefulness of the Iranian nuclear program. Indeed, it is only against the background of the established framework of the Non Proliferation Treaty that a truly sustainable settlement – which addresses the fact that Iran does have the right to the peaceful use of nuclear power – can eventually be reached. While there is no guarantee of success, the current negotiations represent the beginning of a process that actually has an answer to the Iran question. Representatives will meet again to continue that process on March 17. Meanwhile, the IAEA – while still investigating other questions such as Iran's unusual interest in high-speed switches that can be used to detonate nuclear weapons – has declared Iran to be in compliance with the obligations of last November's interim agreement.

Nothing to lose, much to gain

Of course, Iran might be planning to "cheat" again, might only be buying time, or might not really be ready to strike a deal, even if recent developments suggest otherwise. But even if the current efforts should ultimately fail, striving for a long-term solution is better than merely fighting the symptoms of the problem. Furthermore, it is important to remember that counter-proliferation and non-proliferation are not mutually exclusive. After all, a looming Israeli air-strike in combination with sanctions was arguably instrumental in bringing Iran to the negotiating table in the first place. Moreover, the ongoing talks under the interim agreement demonstrate that it is possible for negotiations to inch towards a long-term solution, i.e. a closely monitored, verifiably peaceful Iranian nuclear program, without ever abandoning other options. In short, there is nothing to lose and everything to gain from the path of non-proliferation-diplomacy and seizing the opportunity to reach a long-term, sustainable settlement.

More generally speaking, deterrence-pessimistic non-proliferation-optimists have a point when they argue that it is only due to their efforts that deterrence-optimistic non-proliferation-pessimists can continue to feel validated in their views about the sources of nuclear stability. This is because it is ultimately arms control and disarmament – rather than settling for deterrence or the temporary fixes of counter-proliferation – that have brought *some* transparency and thus *some* sustainable security to the nuclear realm, i.e. the sort of *real* security that does not require a constant threat of nuclear Armageddon. The case of Iran is no different. While we cannot know for sure how serious Iran is, diplomatic efforts have little to lose and much to gain. Thus, for both parties, not seeking the sustainable solution is not an option.

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