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Deterrence Issues after an Agreement: Continuity and Change in Addressing Iranian Nuclear Breakout

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The international debate about the dangers involved in an Iranian breakout to nuclear weapons has been marked by a wide range of observations regarding deterrence issues. At the one end of the spectrum, Iran's potential acquisition of a nuclear weapons arsenal is welcomed, and expected to impose stability in a volatile regional conflict environment – distinctly a minority view. At the other end of the spectrum, is the belief that Iran should not be allowed any uranium enrichment capability, or a plutonium production capability, at all, because they are not required for an Iranian peaceful nuclear program – and are purely the result of Iran's nuclear weapons drive; they indeed have no other plausible legitimate justification. The assumption implicit in the refusal to allow Iran any kind of potentially military nuclear capability, or "breakout" capacity, is that a nuclear armed Iran would pose a serious threat to stability as a whole. More poignantly, it raises the specter that deterrence cannot be guaranteed sufficiently to ensure that Iran would never actually use nuclear weapons, if it ever had them. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that "deterrence stability" would be precarious, and perhaps unattainable for a myriad of reasons worthy of attention and assessment. In between, there are diverse degrees of concern about Iran's nuclear activities, and especially a mainstream sober assessment that Iran's prior clandestine nuclear weapons work – what the IAEA calls "Possible Military Dimensions" – is foreboding, and needs to be addressed and challenged.

It is in this vein that the current negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran are subject to a rollercoaster of cautious optimism at the zenith, and skepticism, "realism" and pessimism in the troughs, regarding the prospects for a successful conclusion of a comprehensive agreement to resolve the crisis. This way or that, the six virtually unanimously adopted UN Security Council resolutions requiring Iran to desist entirely, immediately and without condition from any uranium

enrichment activity, and construction of the Arak heavy water reactor – have been set aside, and a compromise solution allowing Iran some modest enrichment capability is being forged. This compromise is driven by the perceived need to allow the Rouhani government to be able to "sell" a deal to the Supreme Leader, and to the conservative regime extremists, as retaining Iran's breakout capability in principle for later use, while salvaging Iran's "honor" too. The alternative would be a collapse of the diplomatic effort to resolve the crisis, and a return to the relentless expansion of Iran's breakout potential, with possible dire results. Even after such an agreement is concluded, assuming that it will be concluded within a foreseeable time range, the elementary components of deterrence issues will remain salient in the debate about Iran and its nuclear activities – either explicitly, implicitly, or by intuitive application to the context of a potentially nuclear capable Iran, even as it will be subject to unprecedented transparency, quite different from previous cases of covert proliferation efforts over the past three decades.

World leaders have realized overall that deterring a nuclear armed Iran is a dubious proposition. It is not that one can say that a nuclear armed Iran definitely cannot be deterred – it may be; but one cannot state the other side of the coin with confidence, i.e. that Iran definitely will be deterred: the truth lies somewhere in between such assertions, and as such involves risks that decision makers are loath to take. They do take similar levels of risk in policy making in any other field – transportation, health, education, and even in conventional defense, where there is always a certain propensity for things do go wrong, with consequential costs to those who made bad decisions. But when it comes to nuclear war, such risks are out of the question, and steps are mandated to pre-empt even the marginal probabilities, however remote, of deterrence going awry with catastrophic results (“low-probability-high-consequence”, or “low-probability-catastrophic-consequence” scenarios).

The Legacy of Deterrence

Many of the observers of the deterrence scene, with regard to a nuclear armed Iran, make reference to the lessons to be gleaned from deterrence theory, and from the legacy of deterrence as it is believed to have functioned during the Cold War – especially, one might be justified in noting, during the latter half of the Cold War, after the Soviet Union acquired an equality, “parity”, with the United States. The assumptions inherent in deterrence theory, and the legacy of the latter half of the Cold War, involved a conflict of ideas between two antagonists, marked by a series of fundamental principles:

- a. There was no territorial contiguity between the two protagonists, and no territorial grievances or claims one against the other;
- b. Between the peoples of the two nations there did not exist a fundamental cultural inherent hatred harbored towards the other, but only an attempt by the leadership of one to prove the superiority of one economic ideology over the other, and the inevitable eventual demise of the adversary's;
- c. Thus, there was no strong desire, or motive, of one people to wipe the existence of the other's country off the face of the earth, or to bring about the physical extermination of the other;

- d. Both ideologies were essentially economic, or material, emphasizing material values as a scale by which to measure their respective successes and failures. This, in contrast with ideologies in the history of the past century which have emphasized non-material values, and supremacy over a putatively morally inferior other, deterministically doomed to defeat, humiliation, enslavement, or even physical extermination. In today's clash, where religion plays a dominant role, it is secular Western democratic populations which are portrayed as being valueless, hopelessly material, and therefore inevitably doomed to retreat, and to defeat in the face of a morally "superior" idea which puts non-material rewards at the forefront;
- e. Both sides, as of the mid-1960s, were in possession of arsenals of almost a hundred thousand nuclear weapons (50 thousand deployed by the Soviet Union, and 30 thousand deployed by the United States), and *guaranteed secure and survivable assured destruction second strike retaliatory capabilities; ipso facto, neither side possessed first strike capability* (by its definition of being able to eliminate the other's retaliatory capability, or its above described second strike capability); *and the leaderships of both states were in full awareness of this condition*. Therefore war was eliminated as an option, and there was no conceivable goal which could justify the specter of assured destruction of the aggressor's country (the indexes of what constituted "assured destruction" were fluid, but in all cases they involved damage of unimaginable extent);
- f. Other states with independent deterrents, namely the UK and France, adopted postures of "minimum deterrence", with survivable retaliatory capabilities of a magnitude which although not comparable to second strike assured destruction, nevertheless established a level of punishment believed to satisfy the requirements of deterrence, i.e. with the specter of punishment to a degree which an aggressor would not want to incur, and could find no plausible justification for. Later, India and Pakistan adopted "minimum deterrence" postures, versus the People's Republic of China and India respectively, where the specter of assured destruction second strike, or of first strike, would not appear credible (recent developments call into question this long standing posture in South Asia, particularly where Pakistan is concerned, and very recently as regards India too);
- g. Thus were established the fundamental building blocks of what deterrence theory termed its central theme – "deterrence stability", ruling out the dangers, among others, of "escalation dominance", or of "use them or lose them" syndrome in an escalating crisis (which we may want to revisit later in other cases).

The application of these fundamental principles to contexts in which they are, in fact, absent – reduces their relevance, as such environments move further and further away from these essentials of successful deterrence, and of "deterrence stability". First of all, perhaps most obviously, when these principles are applied to states which are neither the United States nor the Soviet Union, the cultural and political essentials undergo transformation. When the dominant ideologies move away from the mostly material competition which characterized the altercation between the liberal idea and socialism – again the principles in question are changed. When the idea of supremacy over an inferior other involves moral values, and moral judgments and assertions, then the application of

rational choice model decision making becomes subject to biases and deliberate dissonances which deterrence theory did not incorporate.

Even today, with all of this being in many ways “old news”, many observers – in academia, the media and the public debate – still cling to the fundamental assumption, or simplistic presumption, in the view of the skeptics, presumption, that no leadership, of any state, be it eccentric as it may (DPRK; Iran under Ahmedinejad; Saddam Hussein’s Iraq; and others) would be willing to risk nuclear retaliation for having launched a nuclear attack, or the survivability of the state, or especially of its regime, and the ensuing undermining of its ideological agenda and *raison d’être*; and that therefore it would never, ever, absolutely and as an ironclad statement, actually use nuclear weapons. But core relevant policy makers have not subscribed to these assertions because there is no guarantee that this is so. Other observers state that the leadership of such a state would “probably”, or “very probably” never use them – and that is exactly the crux of today’s international effort to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons: because “probably”, or even “very probably”, are not good enough, if the possibility can be avoided altogether. In fact, there are alarming reasons to believe that deterrence stability might turn out to be fundamentally unstable, and volatile.

First of all, Iran will never have a guaranteed secure and survivable assured destruction second strike capability, which is an essential building block of deterrence stability. It will always be vulnerable to an adversary’s conventional first strike, whether in the early stages by Israel, or when it has a more extensive arsenal – by the United States. Given today’s intelligence assets and conventional armaments technologies – which were futuristic science fiction decades ago when deterrence theory was shaped, but are now empirical and plentiful – a disarming conventional first strike by Israel or the United States becomes a salient possibility, irrespective of what deterrence theory implied regarding a nuclear first strike in the Cold War superpower context. The impossibility of Iran being able to establish such a secure survivable second strike capability – inevitably leads to “use them or lose them” syndrome in the eventuality of an escalating crisis.

Thus in the Iranian context deterrence stability is threatened, where an environment is created which could contain the seeds of a scenario, wherein not only that it does not heed the assumptions and presumptions of deterrence theory or the legacy of the Cold War, but it actually imposes conditions which are the exact *opposite* of what is required for deterrence stability. Instead of both sides perceived as possessing secure second strike capabilities, and thus neither side possessing first strike capability, a subjective perception may evolve that the *reverse* is true: neither side is perceived to possess credible guaranteed secure and survivable assured destruction retaliatory second strike capability, or the necessary resolve to use it even if the technical capability is believed to exist *per se*; and both sides have *only* first strike capabilities. And in case it hasn’t been stated before, what matters are subjective perceptions, not the objective truth: in this sense the adversaries’ subjective truths *become* the operative objective truth.¹

¹ In this context it might be worth noting that the US Department of Defense 2010 Nuclear Posture Review report states that the United States would not necessarily respond to a nuclear attack by launching a nuclear retaliation, and might well prefer a surgical conventional response directed at those responsible; the decision would be up to the Commander in Chief, i.e. the President. It is believed that this revolutionary statement of intent was included in the NPR at the President’s personal insistence, and reflects the Obama administration’s fundamental revision of past (conservative) strategic theory and practice.

In this sense, deterrence and containment of a nuclear armed Iran is off the agenda, for the time being, and it is a given that Iran will not be allowed, if possible, to acquire nuclear weapons. To this end the currently negotiated comprehensive agreement will pre-empt an unnoticed Iranian breakout, as unprecedentedly intrusive verification and transparency to the IAEA will give good warning of such an intention. So will, probably, the unprecedented focus on Iran by the leading intelligence agencies – especially with respect to undeclared clandestine facilities where the IAEA may be absent, if and when and where they may exist. At least for now, it may be assessed that Iran is unlikely to move suddenly to breakout, because it is completely out of character for the Iranian regime to act in a manner which invites a cataclysmic confrontation: Iran will continue, as it has for several decades now, to tread a middle path – distancing itself from any image of capitulation at the one side, and avoiding cataclysmic confrontation with the international community on the other. But breakout remains a possibility, however marginal or remote, which cannot be absolutely ruled out.

Continuity and Change in the Post-Agreement Environment

Assuming that the parameters of a comprehensive resolution will leave Iran with a number of centrifuges in the thousands, or perhaps even more than that, breakout capability will not have been eliminated. The somewhat artificial creation called “breakout warning time” – because Iran can execute breakout now, with the capabilities that it currently possesses – will be projected as having been extended, giving the international community good warning of any gross violation, and therefore sufficient time to act to foil Iran’s moves towards breakout. If “breakout warning time” is long enough for sanctions to be applied first, military action will not be immediately mandated, but if “warning time” is short – it will. Continuity will prevail in the sense that international community leaders, meaning the decision-makers of the crucial states of relevance, will continue to understand that the risks of a nuclear armed Iran are unacceptable, because deterrence stability cannot be reliably and fully established, as well as, secondarily, because of a host of other detrimental fallout effects on regional and global stability.

Yes, if the effort to prevent Iran from going nuclear fails, for whatever reasons, the world may still want to rely on some fundamentals of deterrence which might predict that Iran will “probably”, or “very probably”, never use its nuclear weapons, but a certain margin of doubt cannot be entirely removed. Some characteristics of the ideology of elements within the Islamic Revolution’s regime give rise to concern that the perils of escalation dominance, cognitive choice decision making, biases, poor information search and processing, information screening (there is information which ideologically extremist authoritarian regimes *do not want to have*), and pure human tendency towards miscalculation, and error, particularly in authoritarian regimes with extremist ideologies which contain mystical and mythical elements of superiority over an inferior other – could lead to catastrophe.

Thus, even after a comprehensive agreement is concluded, reducing the hazard posed by the IR-40 Arak reactor, and imposing a ceiling of x thousand centrifuges and y tons of LEU stored as either UF₆ or as oxide, the driving force mandating the circumspect monitoring of Iran's nuclear activities – will be one of continuity. The deterrence aspects of potential breakout – not having been eliminated, but rather “contained”, perhaps only temporarily – will remain unchanged: a serious concern that a nuclear armed Iran will not warrant a sufficiently reliable application of deterrence theory or Cold War assumptions, not to say presumptions – if they ever were justified in the first place – regarding deterrence stability, or of “containment” as a code phrase, in fact meaning deterrence.²

The change will be in the degree of anxiety about the need to constantly argue the point, previously driven by Iran's heretofore relentless expansion of its potential breakout capacity prior to the freeze evident since the June 2013 elections (even before the November 2013 Geneva interim agreement, and the January 2014 Joint Plan of Action – JPA – implementation). If an agreement is successfully concluded, the dangers of breakout will be contained both in scope and in imminence, and the need to constantly alert the international community about the significance of breakout – will move into a more disciplined, perhaps more relaxed routine. Only if Iran significantly violates the agreement, or abrogates it, will the deterrence issues outlined above once again move to center stage; this is the importance of the agreement.

If there is no agreement, then what happens next depends on what Iran will do: it may continue to by and large comply with the terms of the JPA, pending a renewal of negotiations; or it could go back to doing what it was doing before June 2013, namely the relentless expansion of breakout potential, including the installation and operation of an ever increasing number of centrifuges, including of the more advanced IR-2m type, or resume the installation of major systems at the IR-40 Arak reactor, or renew enrichment to the 20 percent level, or even to 60 percent as some in Iran were threatening to do on the eve of the interim agreement. This would inevitably resuscitate the heated arguments about the intrinsic implications for deterrence issues of Iran's nuclear intentions. In the remote possibility of breakout – as explained above, this is unlikely but cannot be entirely ruled out – the conclusions would be of dramatic significance.

² President Obama's frequent public repudiation of the notion of “containment” of a nuclear armed Iran immediately conjures up the implication that what he means is, in fact, deterrence: he means, in fact, that he opposes a strategy of deterring a nuclear armed Iran, and therefore seeks to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons in the first place, not that he rejects “containment” of Iran after it already has them. Obama appears to prefer to use the word “containment”, rather than “deterrence”, because it is less loaded with razor sharp implications, it's more “rounded” and diplomatic, less hysterical, if you will; but what is meant is a repudiation of the notion of deterrence of a nuclear armed Iran, so “containment” is, in fact, being used a code-phrase to replace, perhaps artificially, “deterrence”.