

To Deter or Not to Deter

Applying Historical Lessons to the Iranian Nuclear Challenge

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SINCE THE DAWN of mankind, humans have sought to enhance their chances of survival through the development of various types of weaponry. And the most effective weapons consistently have been copied by others who felt threatened or intimidated by their existence. Pres. John F. Kennedy considered this tendency in making his March 1963 prediction regarding nuclear weapons proliferation. At that time only the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France were armed with nuclear weapons, but Kennedy forecast that another 15 to 20 countries would join this club by the mid-1970s. He also warned that such a development should be regarded as “the greatest possible danger and hazard.”¹

Although Kennedy’s fears were not realized, the issue of horizontal nuclear proliferation has once again assumed a prominent spot on the international strategic agenda. Like Kennedy, recent US leaders have referred to the spread of nuclear weapons capabilities as the greatest possible danger to international security. In a September 1993 address before the UN General Assembly, Pres. Bill Clinton argued that “one of our most urgent priorities must be attacking the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction [WMD], whether they are nuclear, chemical or biological.”² More recently, Pres. Barack Obama warned that “nuclear proliferation to an increasing number of states” represents the greatest threat to US and global security.³

Concerns about the impact of nuclear proliferation are accentuated by rising uncertainty regarding the reliability of deterrence strategies, causing some analysts to caution that new nuclear enemies “may be madder than

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‘MAD’.”⁴ This article examines the Iranian nuclear program to determine whether these concerns are justified, assess whether preventive war is an appropriate or viable method of eliminating the Iranian nuclear “threat,” and determine whether such a strategy is preferable to one of deterrence. To facilitate this assessment, parallels are drawn between the contemporary Iranian nuclear issue and proliferation challenges originating in China during the 1960s.

The Chinese Proliferation Challenge Lessons from the Past

In the early 1960s many Kennedy administration officials, including the president, viewed potential Chinese nuclear capabilities as a serious threat to Western national security. A June 1961 Joint Chiefs of Staff report concluded that China’s “attainment of a nuclear capability will have a marked impact on the security posture of the United States and the Free World, particularly in Asia.”⁵ Kennedy’s attention was increasingly drawn to the Chinese nuclear issue in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, and in January 1963 he directed the CIA to assign the highest possible priority to uncovering information about Beijing’s nuclear efforts. Kennedy’s apprehension was further heightened by his belief that the Chinese attached a lower value to human life and would therefore be less susceptible to deterrence threats. Between 15 and 30 million Chinese are estimated to have died as a result of Mao Zedong’s misrule and the Great Leap Forward program of rapid industrialization. Compounding these concerns was the fact that when Mao launched the program in 1958, he was known to have declared openly that “half of China may well have to die.”⁶

The context in which China’s nuclear developments took place was also very important in shaping the Kennedy administration’s threat perceptions. China in the 1960s had already fought the United States in Korea, attacked India, and threatened Indochina, Indonesia, and Taiwan. Chairman Mao had publicly stated that nuclear war with the United States was a scenario not to be feared. He is quoted by the Chinese as saying, “If the worst came to the worst and half of mankind died, the other half would remain while imperialism would be razed to the ground and the whole world would become socialist.”⁷ This, coupled with Chinese support for the Vietcong and North Vietnamese insurgencies, meant that China in the early 1960s possessed all of the characteristics of what is now referred

to as a “rogue state.” Many analysts were also concerned that the strategy of deterrence, which had prevented a nuclear war with the Soviet Union since the beginning of the Cold War, could not be applied to the Chinese.

US officials were keen to develop measures to address this problem, and a number of high-level debates took place within the White House over whether to use military force to curb China’s embryonic nuclear program. During a visit to Moscow in July 1963, Amb. Averell Harriman was instructed to play on the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations and draw out Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s opinion regarding potential US action aimed at limiting or preventing Chinese nuclear developments. The matter was also discussed during a visit to Washington that year by Chiang Kai-shek’s son, Gen Chiang Ching-kuo. He suggested that the United States provide covert support for paramilitary operations against Beijing’s nuclear installations and emphasized that his exiled government “would assume full political responsibility” for any action.⁸

In parallel to deliberations about the need for preventive military action against China’s nuclear program, the State Department’s Policy Planning Committee was reevaluating the notion that a Chinese nuclear capability would have an intolerable impact on Western security. This committee, headed by China expert Robert Johnson, submitted its first report in October 1963, downplaying the military threat posed by Chinese nuclear endeavors. The committee argued that preventive action was unnecessary because the vast gulf between Chinese and US nuclear capabilities made it exceedingly unlikely that China would use nuclear weapons unless its territory were directly under attack. They viewed Chinese nuclear ambitions as a vehicle for gaining prestige and respect rather than as a means of enabling an aggressive military posture. Johnson submitted a subsequent report in April 1964, which concluded that “the significance of [a Chinese nuclear] capability is not such as to justify the undertaking of actions which would involve great political costs or military risks.”⁹ In the final section of this report, Johnson expressed doubts over whether preventive action would have the desired long-term effect of halting Beijing’s nuclear enterprises, stating further that

It is doubtful whether, even with completion of initial photographic coverage of the mainland, we will have anything like complete assurance that we will have identified all significant nuclear installations. Thus, even “successful” action may not necessarily prevent the ChiComs from detonating a nuclear device in the next few years. If an attack should be made, some installations are missed and

Communist China subsequently demonstrates that it is continuing to produce nuclear weapons, what is likely to be the reaction to the half-finished U.S. effort:¹⁰

Iran—the Contemporary Proliferation Challenge

The themes circulating in the current debate over the Iranian nuclear impasse are similar to those regarding Beijing in the early 1960s. As in the proliferation challenge posed by China, one proposed method of countering the Iranian threat is to engage in a preventive war against Tehran's nuclear infrastructure. In discussions of how to deal with Iran's nuclear defiance, Bush administration officials frequently warned that all options were "being kept on the table."¹¹ Although President Obama has approached the Iranian nuclear issue in a more conciliatory manner than his Republican predecessor, the White House continues to warn Tehran that the use of force has not been ruled out. In January 2009, when asked whether military options were still under consideration, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs replied, "The President hasn't changed his viewpoint that he should preserve all his options."¹²

Arguments in favor of preventive military action against the Islamic Republic of Iran are common in the academic community. Norman Podhoretz has argued that "if Iran is to be prevented from developing a nuclear arsenal, there is no alternative to the actual use of military force."¹³ He compares Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's public expressions of the desire to "wipe Israel off the map" with the objectives outlined by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* and argues that failing to utilize military force to stop Ahmadinejad now is as irresponsible as not stopping Hitler at Munich when "he could have been defeated at an infinitely lower cost."¹⁴

Bernard Lewis makes the case that the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD) will not function when applied to Iran. For him, there is no comparison between the Islamic Republic and other governments with nuclear weapons as a result of "what can only be described as the apocalyptic worldview of Iran's present rulers."¹⁵ Lewis concedes that a direct nuclear attack by Iran against the West is unlikely in the near future but maintains that Israel has good reason to be concerned by such a prospect. Although an Iranian nuclear attack against Israel would incur an unavoidable number of Palestinian Muslim casualties, Lewis argues that Iran will not be deterred by this prospect. For him the regime will even use the phrase, "Allah will know his own," to convince themselves that they

are actually doing collateral Muslim casualties a favor by “giving them a quick pass to heaven . . . without the struggles of martyrdom.” Lewis cites al-Qaeda’s acceptance of large numbers of Muslim casualties in the 1998 attacks against US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania as evidence of this phenomenon. He also maintains that the Iranian Shia complex of martyrdom and apocalyptic visions renders any concerns about possible Israeli retaliation obsolete. Mainstream Shia religious doctrine maintains that after the death of the Prophet Mohammed, leadership of the Muslim community was transferred to a succession of 12 imams, beginning with Imam Ali through to the 12th imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi (born 868 AD). The Mahdi did not die, but in 873 or 874 entered what is known as a period of Lesser Occulation. It is said that he reemerged briefly in 940 before entering the Greater Occulation and will not return until the Day of Judgement to usher in a worldwide incorrupt and just Islamic government.¹⁶ While there is no precise theological prediction for when this day of judgement will occur, it is commonly believed that it will happen at a time when the world has descended into chaos. He concludes that for people with this mind-set, “MAD is not a constraint; it is an inducement.”¹⁷

Clearly, there are similarities between today’s concerns regarding Iranian nuclear intentions and those circulating about the prospect of a nuclear-armed China in the 1960s. Problems associated with preventive military action to curb Tehran’s nuclear endeavors also closely resemble those identified vis-à-vis China. First, such efforts are extremely unlikely to *permanently* remove the nuclear threat. The general consensus is that while preventive attacks are likely to set back the Iranian program, they would not prevent its recovery. In December 2008, *The Atlantic* magazine collaborated with retired Air Force colonel Sam Gardiner in a series of war games focused on Iran. After close consideration of the location and physical features of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure and a range of possible military options, Gardiner concluded that there was no *permanent* military solution for the issues of Iran.¹⁸ It is also highly likely that preventive action would serve as a catalyst for increased Persian nationalism and provide impetus for the regime to resume nuclear efforts with increased vigor. From this perspective, military action would enforce the perception of a perpetually hostile West and the belief that a nuclear weapons capability is essential to deter Western aggression.¹⁹

It is important to remember that preventive action would qualify as an act of war, and it is reasonable to assume that the Islamic Republic would

retaliate. One possible scenario relates to Tehran's ability to manipulate its political and military influence in Iraq to undermine the war effort and the overall stability of the region. Despite the belief that virtually all of Tehran's intelligence and covert action organizations secured sources of influence in post-Saddam Iraq,²⁰ it is clear that the Iranians have been restrained in their activity there more recently. The US State Department's 2008 *Country Reports of Terrorism* recognized that while terrorism "committed by illegal armed groups receiving weapons and training from Iran continued to endanger the security and stability of Iraq . . . incidents of such violence were markedly lower than in the previous year."²¹ Although Iran has scaled down its support for Iraqi militia, this support could intensify noticeably in the wake of a preventive strike.

The Case for Deterrence

In light of the predicted costs and questionable benefits of preventive military options, it must be said that the only persuasive justification for starting another war in the Middle East would be if there were good reason to believe that the leadership in Tehran is fundamentally undeterrable. Fortunately, pessimistic predictions that the ayatollahs will be inclined to initiate a nuclear Armageddon are unlikely to manifest themselves. Although Ahmadinejad's statements about wiping Israel off the map are inexcusable, they do not indicate a proclivity toward nuclear suicide. Claims to the contrary ignore the fact that such provocations have been part of Iranian political rhetoric since the 1979 revolution and are not symptomatic of any broader nuclear ambitions.²² Ahmadinejad's confrontational discourse also reaps political benefits in the sense that it undermines his reformist opposition who he can accuse of seeking rapprochement with a hostile and threatening West.²³ It is also interesting to note that such rhetoric is not unique to Iran. During the Cold War, Nikita Khrushchev once infamously promised to "bury America," whereas Ronald Reagan declared that the Soviet Union would end up on the "ash heap of history."

Future Iranian nuclear attacks against Israel are not strategically *impossible*, but there are a number of reasons to be confident that Iran will be deterred from taking such action. Bernard Lewis maintains that the Iranian regime will not be deterred by the fact that a nuclear attack against Israel would also kill a staggeringly high number of Palestinians and Muslim citizens in neighboring states. However, what Lewis fails to recognize is

that the portrayal of itself as the foremost defender of Palestinians is an image that Iran has pursued with vigor since the 1979 revolution. The acceptance by any Iranian leadership of a large number of Muslim deaths is simply not consistent with this long-standing expression of concern for the Palestinians.²⁴ The relevance of his comparison between a potential Iranian nuclear attack against Israel and the 1998 al-Qaeda African embassy bombings is also questionable. Al-Qaeda ideology has exploited Islamic concepts such as *takfir* and *jihad* to justify the killing of other Muslims. The Iranian leadership does not ascribe to this militant extremist vision and is therefore unlikely to view collateral Muslim casualties as acceptable on the grounds that they have been granted “a quick pass to heaven.” The prospect of damage to the holy city of Jerusalem (the third holiest location in Islam) is also likely to deter Iran from initiating a nuclear conflict with Israel.

Even if the Iranians were sufficiently confident in their ability to initiate nuclear attacks against Israel without damaging Jerusalem or harming disproportionate numbers of Muslim civilians, there is still reason to be optimistic about the prospects of deterrence. A November 2007 study for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) estimated the Israeli nuclear arsenal at more than 200 boosted and fusion weapons, most with a yield of between 20 and 100 kilotons and some reaching one megaton.²⁵ In a hypothetical nuclear exchange, these high-yield weapons, combined with accurate delivery systems, would give the Israelis the option of striking all major Iranian cities while maintaining a reserve strike capability to ensure that no other Arab states could capitalize on the military distraction caused by an Iranian nuclear strike.²⁶ Israel’s fleet of at least three *Dolphin*-class submarines armed with nuclear missiles also provides the Jewish state with a second-strike capability that nullifies any effort on the part of Tehran to conduct a decapitation strike and remove Israel’s capacity for retaliation. Finally, aside from the credibility of Israeli deterrent capabilities, the Iranians must also consider the implications of US security guarantees to Israel. In her 2008 presidential campaign, then senator and now secretary of state Hillary Clinton warned that if Iran were to “consider launching an attack on Israel, we would be able to totally obliterate them.”²⁷ Although the credibility of such a threat is questionable, US defense commitments to Israel are nevertheless a factor the Iranian leadership will have to take seriously.

Although the Iranian regime theoretically should be deterred by credible deterrent threats supported by sufficient second-strike capabilities, Lewis

has warned that Iran's mainstream Shia religious ideology will encourage the leadership to welcome punitive retaliation and destruction as a means of hastening the return of the hidden Mahdi. While such arguments have a certain headline-grabbing quality, they do not reflect the true character of Iran's international conduct. Regardless of the frequent examples of ideologically inspired rhetorical bombast, the Iranian regime has behaved in a strategically calculating and rational manner since the 1979 revolution. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, the Islamic regime issued a series of bloodcurdling promises to embrace martyrdom and, if necessary, fight to the last man. However, when various strands of the war came together to indicate that Iran stood no chance of emerging victorious, Ayatollah Khomeini ended the conflict. In a public address on 20 July 1988, Khomeini stated that while he would have found it "more bearable to accept death and martyrdom," his decision was "based only on the interests of the Islamic Republic."²⁸ This statement ended Iran's eight-year war with Iraq and provides reassurance about the likely future of Iranian decision making. The fact that Khomeini, who has been described as the most extreme of them all, bowed to reality and pragmatic national interest rather than embrace martyrdom indicates that the Iranian leadership is capable of making rational and strategic calculations.

Iran's approach to the US-led coalition effort to remove the Taliban in Afghanistan provides yet another example of the regime's willingness to yield to realist principles as opposed to ideological inclinations. The Iranian government and the Taliban shared an antagonistic relationship long before the events of 11 September 2001 precipitated Operation Enduring Freedom. Animosity toward the Afghan regime stemmed from the movement's radical Sunni origins and close associations with Pakistan's military and intelligence services. Influenced by their unique Persian pride and stature as an Islamic state, Iran also viewed the Taliban as "reactionary peasants" tainting the image of Islam. Hostility was further exacerbated by the persecution of Afghanistan's Shia Muslim minority and the spillover of drugs and instability across Iran's borders.²⁹ This history of enmity led to a remarkable congruence of post-September 11 interests between the United States and Iran. Despite long-standing hostility toward the United States, the Iranian government, in true "an enemy of my enemy is my friend" fashion, was extremely helpful with the US-led military effort in Afghanistan. It played an active and constructive role in the Bonn process, which created the new central government in Kabul and was one of the

first countries to officially recognize the postconflict leadership of Pres. Hamid Karzai.³⁰

Overall, regardless of how Iran is often portrayed, the historical record of pragmatic behavior discussed above indicates that the regime is willing to prioritize realist considerations of national interest rather than revolutionary and religious ideology. This strongly suggests that it is highly unlikely that a nuclear-armed Iran will attack Israel without consideration of the consequences or that the mullahs will deliberately initiate a nuclear Armageddon to hasten the return of the Mahdi. Although it is impossible to prove with absolute certainty how Iran will act in the future, previous behavior does undermine Lewis' arguments against the compatibility of deterrence and Islamic ideology.

Given its track record of terrorist sponsorship, it is understandable that some analysts have drawn attention to the possibility that Iran may pass nuclear weapons, materials, or knowledge to nonstate actors. One of the biggest post-September 11 concerns is that terrorism could escalate to the nuclear level, and a transfer from a nuclear-weapons state to a terrorist proxy is one way that this nightmare scenario could occur. As the 2005 *Country Reports on Terrorism* emphasized, "State sponsors of terrorism pose a grave WMD terrorism threat. . . . Iran presents a particular concern, given its active sponsorship of terrorism and its continued development of a nuclear program. . . . Like other state sponsors of terrorism with WMD programs, Iran could support terrorist organizations seeking to acquire WMD."³¹

Although it is possible that Iran could transfer nuclear weapons to one of its many terrorist proxies, this is exceedingly unlikely for a number of reasons. First of all, it is *incredibly* unlikely that *any* state, regardless of its ideological inclinations, would knowingly allow nuclear weapons to fall into the hands of actors it did not directly control, simply out of fear that the weapons might then be used against it. It is also worth noting that Iran is known to be affiliated with a mixture of Islamist factions and radical secular groups.³² Although these ties are inexcusable, links with groups of varying ideological and political inclinations indicate that Iranian involvement is motivated by secular and national interests rather than radical preferences. The 2008 *Country Reports on Terrorism* also identifies Iran's use of terrorist proxies as a means of advancing "its key *national security* and *foreign policy* interests" and makes no mention of religious or ideological loyalties (emphasis added).³³

Other nuclear terrorism scaremongers highlight the concern that Iran may be tempted to use one of its many terrorist proxies to carry out an anonymous nuclear attack against one of its enemies.³⁴ Proponents of this argument, however, neglect the fact that almost all of the nuclear material left behind after an explosion is suitable for forensic investigation to attribute nuclear weapons to their origin. Since weapons-grade materials do not occur naturally, material analyzed in the aftermath of an explosion will contain certain physical, chemical, elemental, and isotopic signatures which in turn provide clues about the origin of the weapon, making anonymity impossible.³⁵ Attribution capabilities have been complemented by well-articulated deterrence threats from Western governments. In October 2006, following North Korea's nuclear test, President Bush declared that the "transfer of nuclear weapons or material" to terrorists "would be considered a grave threat" and that North Korea would be held "fully accountable" for such action.³⁶ In a February 2008 speech at Stanford University, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley expanded this threat to a universal scope, stating that "the United States will hold any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor fully accountable for supporting or enabling terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction, whether by facilitating, financing, or providing expertise or safe haven for such efforts."³⁷ Even though President Obama has yet to make any similar reference to Iran, in May 2007 then senator Joseph Biden, wrote, "We must make clear in advance that we will hold accountable any country that contributes to a terrorist nuclear attack, whether by directly aiding would-be nuclear terrorists or wilfully neglecting its responsibility to secure the nuclear weapons or weapons-usable nuclear material within its borders."³⁸ Barring a complete reversal of strategic thinking, it is likely the United States will continue with this posture of expanded deterrence, regardless of Obama's gestures of reconciliation towards Iran.

When discussing the implications of nuclear proliferation, it is important to consider what factors encourage states to cross the nuclear threshold. Do states acquire nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, or are there more peaceful, defense-orientated incentives driving horizontal proliferation? In answering this question it is possible to identify further parallels between the current Iranian nuclear issue and the Chinese challenge of the 1960s. The Chinese flirted with nuclear research in the late 1940s, but it was only after the outbreak of the Korean War that the importance of nuclear weapons in balancing the United States received full attention. The war on

the Korean Peninsula was a central issue in the 1952 presidential campaign of Dwight Eisenhower, wherein he pledged his commitment to resolving the conflict. He warned the Chinese that if armistice negotiations proved unsuccessful, he would be willing to escalate the war and publicly hinted at the possible use of nuclear weapons against Beijing.³⁹ This perception of US “nuclear blackmail” was enhanced further during the 1955 Taiwan Straits crisis when Secretary of State Dulles warned that the United States was willing to use force to prevent the communist conquest of Taiwan and that Washington intended to establish defense commitments with the island.⁴⁰

Like China in the 1960s, it is likely that the Iranian regime also views the military muscle of the United States with acute trepidation. The United States currently has military forces stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan, a large number of Gulf States, South Asia, and Turkey. Although the ousting of Saddam Hussein improved Iran’s *actual* security situation, it also confirmed mounting Iranian fears of strategic encirclement. Officials in Tehran became concerned that not only might Iran be sandwiched between two US client states, but also that regime change in Iraq might encourage similar American ambitions for Iran. The Iranian leadership is also likely to have drawn important lessons from the way the United States dealt with the respective proliferation challenges from North Korea and Iraq. Their view is likely to be that the United States is averse to challenging states militarily once they have a nuclear capability but is more aggressive and favors regime change in states that have demonstrated nuclear intent. Viewed from this perspective, the notion that nuclear weapons are strategically necessary to ensure regime survival and territorial integrity is understandable.⁴¹

As noted, the Policy Planning Committee report submitted in October 1963 identified Chinese nuclear weapons as a vehicle for gaining prestige rather than a means of facilitating aggression. Indeed, Mao is known to have viewed China’s independent ability to mobilize and commit its armies in an equal if not greater manner than other states as an inherent part of Chinese sovereign independence. In 1958 he reportedly informed senior colleagues that without nuclear capabilities, “others don’t think what we say carries weight.”⁴² There is evidence that the desire for prestige and international respect is also driving Iranian nuclear endeavors. The general consensus among Iran’s clerical leaders is that the Islamic Republic is the representative of revolutionary Islam and the guardian of oppressed

Muslims everywhere. They therefore believe that the fate of the worldwide Islamic community depends on the ability of Iran to develop the military capabilities to protect and advance that community's interests. In an April 2006 speech before the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, its secretary Hassan Rohani emphasized this point. "This is good for our international reputation and shows that we have made good technological progress and have been successful in the area of technology," he stated. "It is going to be a very effective and important statement."⁴³ His speech also indicated that the Iranians may view nuclear weapons acquisition as a means of forcing dialogue from other states. Rohani pointed out that: "The world did not want Pakistan to have an atomic bomb or Brazil to have the fuel cycle, but Pakistan built its bomb and Brazil had its fuel cycle, and the world started to work with them. Our problem is that we have not achieved either one, but we are standing at the threshold."⁴⁴

Prospects—Applying the Proliferation Lessons of the Past

The 1963 Policy Planning Committee report argued that a Chinese nuclear capability would not fundamentally alter the balance of military power in Asia. It stated that the great asymmetry in US and Chinese nuclear capabilities made Chinese first use of nuclear weapons "highly unlikely except in the event of an attack upon the mainland which threatened the existence of the regime." It also argued that nuclear capabilities would not alter "Chinese prudence in the use of military force" and, if anything, "could increase Chicom caution." Finally, the report stressed the need for the United States to maintain an appropriate balance between credible nuclear retaliatory threats and an "evident visible ability to deal with communist aggression" in dealing with a nuclear-armed China. This was considered essential to reassure Asian allies that the United States would be willing to respond to all levels of Chinese aggression in the region.⁴⁵

On 16 October 1964, one year after the report, Beijing announced the detonation of its first atomic device. The Chinese government also stated that the acquisition of nuclear capabilities was driven entirely by defense motivations and breaking the nuclear monopoly of the two superpowers. It also stressed the importance of the ultimate abolition of nuclear weapons.⁴⁶ In effect, this statement confirmed the State Department's prediction that Beijing would act as a responsible nuclear power. Although it is not possible

to say with certainty how Iran will behave if it crosses the nuclear threshold, the issues discussed in this article indicate that it too will behave in a pragmatic fashion. The fact that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has recently referred to nuclear weapons as “a symbol of destruction whose use if forbidden”⁴⁷ is also reassuring.

In response to the 1964 Chinese nuclear test, Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson swiftly issued the following statement:

This explosion comes as no surprise to the United States Government. It has been fully taken into account in planning our own defense program and our own nuclear capability. Its military significance should not be overestimated. . . . Still more basic is the fact that if and when the Chinese Communists develop nuclear weapons systems, the free world nuclear strength will continue, of course, to be enormously greater. . . . The United States reaffirms its defense commitments in Asia. Even if Communist China should eventually develop an effective nuclear capability, that capability would have no effect upon the readiness of the United States to respond to requests from Asian nations for help in dealing with Communist Chinese aggression.⁴⁸

The United States should not disregard the relevance of the Chinese proliferation experience in the 1960s in dealing with the contemporary challenge posed by Iran. China’s nuclear capabilities did not translate into the intolerable military problems foreseen by President Kennedy but may actually have facilitated rapprochement between the two countries.⁴⁹ Mao Zedong was also a much more ruthless and revolutionary figure than Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mao actively supported anti-Western insurgencies all over the world, allowed millions of his own countrymen to perish in his mismanaged attempts at reform, and even spoke openly about his willingness to destroy half of the world for communism to triumph. Despite this track record, the desire for self-preservation and national survival has seen China armed with nuclear weapons successfully deterred from using them for more than 40 years.

As with China in the 1960s, if Iran does cross the nuclear threshold, there will be a massive asymmetry between Tehran’s nuclear capabilities and those of Washington. Both the United States and Israel have the capability to inflict what can only be described as unacceptable damage against Iran in retaliation for its first use of nuclear weapons. However, when a new state enters the nuclear club, it is *essential* that deterrent relationships are quickly established. In 1964 President Johnson *communicated* to the Chinese a *credible* threat that the United States had an “enormously greater” nuclear *capability* and that he was willing, if necessary, to use

force to respond to Chinese aggression. This threat set the parameters for a deterrent relationship that has now been successful for more than four decades and ought to provide valuable guidance for the current US government. President Obama is clearly attempting to establish a relationship with the Iranians and dissuade them from pursuing their nuclear weapons ambitions. If these measures to halt the nuclear program fail, then at least they will have laid the framework through which deterrent threats can be communicated. President Obama would be wise to draw on some of the more assertive rhetoric of his predecessor, George W. Bush. He should make clear that the United States is committed to responding to Iranian aggression, be it direct or indirect, and ensure the United States maintains the capabilities to make deterrent threats credible. In the long term, a nuclear-armed Iran may even encourage a more cautious foreign policy from Tehran and pave the way for a more balanced and constructive engagement with the West. **SSQ**

Notes

1. News Conference 52, Pres. John F. Kennedy, State Department Auditorium, Washington, DC, 21 March 1963, http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Press+Conferences/003POFO5Pressconference52_03211963.htm.
2. Cited in "Remarks by Les Aspin, Counterproliferation Initiative, Presidential Decision Directive PDD/NSC 18, December 1993," <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/pdd18.htm>.
3. Anthony Capaccio and Nicholas Johnston, "Obama Nuclear Policy Focuses on Terrorism Threat," *Bloomberg News Bulletin*, 7 April 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601070&sid=apXunD6dMZJE>.
4. Expression used by Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS) in debating the FY-96 National Defense Authorization Act, 6 September 1995, <http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/congress/1995/s950906a.htm>.
5. Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, memorandum, 26 June 1961, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. 22, *China; Korea; Japan*, doc. 36, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v22/d36>.
6. Nicholas D. Kristof, "'Mao': The Real Mao," *New York Times*, 23 October 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/23/books/review/23cover.html?pagewanted=print>.
7. Cited in Rosemary Foot, *The Practice of Power: US Relations with China Since 1949* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 175.
8. William E. Colby to McGeorge Bundy, special assistant to the president, memorandum, 19 September 1963, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB38/document9.pdf>.
9. "An Exploration of the Possible Bases for Action against the Chinese Communist Nuclear Facilities," paper prepared in the Policy Planning Council, Washington, DC, 14 April 1964, http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/report/other/frus_30_025.htm.
10. *Ibid.*

11. "Bush Warns Iran of 'all options'," *BBC News*, 11 June 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7447428.stm>. Considerations of preventive war have also been made public by Israeli officials. During a symposium in Herzliya in February 2009, Defense Minister Ehud Barak stated that "Israel's policy is clear: we do not take any option off the table with regards to Iran's nuclear program." Ofri Ilani, "Barak: Time Needed to Deal with Iran Slipping through Our Fingers," *Haaretz*, 25 February 2009, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasen/spages/1066855.html>.

12. Tom Baldwin, "US Pours Cold Water over Hopes of Iran Deal," *Times* (London), 30 January 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article5614805.ece.

13. Norman Podhoretz, "The Case for Bombing Iran," *Commentary*, June 2007, 21, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/the-case-for-bombing-iran-10882>.

14. *Ibid.*, 20. Podhoretz is not alone in his comparison of these two leaders. In April 2009 Knesset speaker Reuven Rivlin drew the same analogy stating that "the hate expressed by the President of Iran is a warning to all humanity [that] the world [had] witnessed the return of Adolf Hitler." He then went on to say that although "this time he has a beard and speaks Persian . . . [his] words are the same words and the aspirations are the same aspirations and the determination to find the weapons to achieve those aspirations is the same menacing determination." "The New Hitler Speaks Persian," *Haaretz*, April 21, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1079945.html>.

15. Bernard Lewis, "At War: Does Iran Have Something in Store?" *Wall Street Journal*, 22 August 2006, <http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110008768>.

16. Ali Alfoneh, "Ahmadinejad versus the Clergy," American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, August 2008, 1, http://www.aei.org/docLib/20080820_No523414MEOg.pdf. In one hadith the fifth Shiite Imam predicted that when the Mahdi returns, "like Muhammad, the God messenger, he will destroy everything that was before and resume Islam from the beginning." In other hadiths it is claimed that the Mahdi will kill two-thirds of the global population in order to "clean the earth from non-believers and deniers." Cited in Mehdi Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy*, Policy Focus no. 79 (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2008), 3–4, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus79Final.pdf>.

17. *Ibid.*

18. James Fallows, "Will Iran Be Next?" *Atlantic*, December 2004, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200412/fallows>.

19. Investigations by the IAEA have traced Iran's clandestine nuclear activities to 1985. According to Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt this suggests that "Iran has been engaged in less of a nuclear race than a nuclear saunter." They share the concern that preventive military action may reverse this trend and cause the Iranian leadership to assign a higher priority to the program than it has previously enjoyed. Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt, *The Last Resort: Consequences of Preventive Military Action against Iran*, Policy Focus no. 84 (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2008), 6, <http://www.theisraelproject.org/af/cf/%7B84DC5887-741E-4056-8D91-A389164BC94E%7D/POLICYFOCUS84.PDF>. Clawson and Eisenstadt also point out that when Iraq attacked Iran in the 1980 air raids on Tehran, other major cities did in fact cause the population to rally behind the regime and even the former Shah's son volunteered to fight (although his offer was refused). *Ibid.*, 8.

20. Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Threat from Iran," Prepared testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, 29 September 2005, 6, <http://www.brookings.edu/views/testimony/pollack/20050929.pdf>.

21. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008* (Washington: Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, April 2009), 116, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122599.pdf>.
22. According to Mehdi Khalaji, anti-Israeli rhetoric appeared in Iran for the first time in the 1940s from the Fadayeen-e Islam, an Islamic fundamentalist group committed to the elimination of the “enemies of God.” Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics*, 24, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus79Final.pdf>.
23. Shmuel Bar, Rachel Machtiger, and Shmuel Bachar, “Iranian Nuclear Decision Making under Ahmadinejad,” Paper prepared for the Eighth Herzliya Conference on the Balance of Israel’s National Security, 20–23 January 2008, (draft), 16, <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/Uploads/2814ShmuelBarIranianAhmadinejad.pdf>.
24. Andrew Terrill, “Deterrence in the Israeli-Iranian Strategic Standoff,” *Parameters*, Spring 2009, 85–86.
25. Anthony H. Cordesman, “Iran, Israel and Nuclear War,” PowerPoint presentation to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2007, slide 6, http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/071119_iran.is&nuclearwar.pdf.
26. Ibid.
27. Jake Tapper, “Pennsylvania’s Six Week Primary Ends Tonight,” *ABC News*, 22 April 2008, <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/Vote2008/story?id=4698059>.
28. Cited in John Simpson and Tira Schubert, *Lifting the Veil: Life in Revolutionary Iran* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 305.
29. *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, report of an independent task force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations co-chaired by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert Gates (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), 27, http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Iran_TF.pdf.
30. Ibid., 27–28.
31. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005* (Washington: Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, April 2006), 173, http://www.npr.org/documents/2006/apr/state_dept_terrorism_report.pdf.
32. Islamist groups include Hezbollah, HAMAS, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Islamic militants in Afghanistan. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Kurdish Workers Party, and Iraqi militias are among the secular radicals supported by Iran. Anti-Israeli groups such as Hezbollah and HAMAS also provide the Iranian regime a conduit for fueling the Arab-Israeli conflict as a means of diverting attention from itself.
33. *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008*, 10.
34. Scott Sagan drew attention to this possibility during a Herzliya Conference in Israel in February 2009, http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/22412/Sagan_talk_Herzeliya_Conference_020409.pdf.
35. M. J. Kristo et al., *Model Action Plan for Nuclear Forensics and Nuclear Attribution*, UCRL-TR-202675 (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories, 2004). <https://e-reports-ext.llnl.gov/pdf/305453.pdf>.
36. Cited in David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, “US Debates Deterrence for Nuclear Terrorism,” *New York Times*, 8 May 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/08/washington/08nuke.html?ref=world>.
37. “Remarks by the National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, to the Center for International Security and Cooperation,” Stanford University, 8 February 2008, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/02/20080211-6.html>. In October the same year Defense secretary Robert Gates, who continued to fill this role within the current Obama administration, also stated before the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace that “the United States will hold any state,

terrorist group or other non-state actor or individual fully accountable for supporting or enabling terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction—whether by facilitating, financing or providing expertise or safe haven for such efforts.” Cited in Thom Shanker, “Gates Gives Rationale for Expanded Deterrence,” *New York Times*, 29 October 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/29/washington/29gates.html>.

38. Cited in Michael Levi, *Deterring State Sponsorship of Nuclear Terrorism*, Council on Foreign Relations Special Report no. 39 (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, September 2008), 8, http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Nuclear_Deterrence_CSR39.pdf.

39. John W. Lewis and Litai Xue, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, (1988), 13–14. He later stated that his intention was “to let the Communist authorities understand that, in the absence of satisfactory progress, we intended to move decisively without inhibition in our use of weapons, and would no longer be responsible for confining hostilities to the Korean Peninsula.” Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953–1956* (London: Heinemann Press, 1963), 181.

40. Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 25.

41. Henry Sokolski, *Taming the Next Set of Strategic Weapons Threats* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2006), 30. Sokolski also points out that as well as deterring a preemptive invasion, Pyongyang’s presumed nuclear capabilities actually led to offers of economic and security benefits. Statements from Iranian officials indicate that Iran has aspirations to emulate such a diplomatic situation. For example Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi has stated that “we are ready for discussions and negotiations, but we need to know what benefits the Islamic Republic would get from them.” Cited in *ibid.*, 57.

42. Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 36.

43. Cited in Chen Kane, “Nuclear Decision-Making in Iran: A Rare Glimpse,” Middle East Brief no. 5, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, May 2006, 3, <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB5.pdf>.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Robert H. Johnson, *A Chinese Communist Nuclear Detonation and Nuclear Capability: Major Conclusions and Key Issues*, report prepared by the State Department Policy Planning Council, 15 October 1963, declassified 28 November 1997, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB38/document10.pdf>.

46. Chi Wang, “China’s Nuclear Programs and Policies,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, March 1983, 18.

47. “Khamenei: Nuclear Bombs Illegal and Harem,” [*sic*] *Islam Times*, 20 February 2010, <http://www.islamtimes.org/vdcgt39x.ak9zw4j5ra.html>.

48. Lyndon B. Johnson, “Statement by the President on the First Chinese Nuclear Device,” 16 October 1964, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=26615>.

49. In 1969 the United States and China initiated a dialogue that had developed into an unspoken “anti-Soviet alliance” by 1972.