

Why Kenneth Waltz is Both Right & Wrong About the ‘Iranian Bomb’



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Summary

The present paper examines Kenneth Waltz’s position that “A nuclear-armed Iran would...most likely restore stability to the Middle East” and argues that although Iran’s nuclearization will not cause a substantial increase in the probability of nuclear use in the region, it remains nevertheless an unwelcome development as it will probably increase regional instability.

However, the ‘demonization’ of Iran has inflated the value of its nuclear capabilities and strengthened the hardliners. The West should “return to a sense of proportion” and “re-enlarge the zoom” of its relations with Iran, which is too important for the West to be reduced to the nuclear issue.

Finally, there is an urgent need to address the regional security vacuum and try to create a new comprehensive regional security system in the Gulf region.

Kenneth Waltz, one of the icons of International Relations theory, recently published a short essay suggesting that “A nuclear-armed Iran would...most likely restore stability to the Middle East” (Why Iran should get the bomb, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 91, No. 4, pp. 2-4). The Waltz school of thought (“More may be better”) argues that “Nations that have nuclear weapons have strong incentives to use them responsibly. Because they do, the measured spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared.” British scholar Hedley Bull commented that taken to its logical extreme, this argument implies the best way to keep death off the roads is to put a small amount of nitroglycerine on every car bumper. Everybody would drive indefinitely more carefully, but accidents would occur -people being human and cars breaking down- and the results would be far nastier. Waltz argues that “If Iran goes nuclear, Israel and Iran will deter each other, as nuclear powers always have. There has never been a full scale war between two nuclear armed states” (this conclusion seems to ignore the Cuban missile crisis, when the two superpowers apparently got really close to a nuclear confrontation).

At the heart of the views of the Waltz school is a simple extrapolation from the non-use of nuclear weapons in the U.S.-Soviet context to the future non-use of those weapons in other regions. This analogy overlooks the unique combination of circumstances that has helped to ensure nuclear peace over the past decades. The non-use of nuclear weapons has rested upon particular geopolitical and technical factors: cautious leadership (despite the harsh rhetoric of both sides); the fact that neither national survival nor territorial integrity was immediately at stake and that neither power has ever

been at war with the other; the lack of common borders, thereby lessening flash points for conflict and impeding escalation; and adequate technical means to prevent accidental detonation and the unauthorized use of nuclear weapons. Without these features, mere fear of nuclear destruction, though itself quite important, might not have sufficed.

For example, the probability of the use of nuclear weapons as a result of miscalculation or loss of control during a crisis cannot be easily dismissed. The lack of secure second-strike forces and reliable C4I systems in most new nuclear weapon states and the adoption of launch-on-warning (LOW) postures as a consequence, could result to strategic instability and could increase the probability of the use of nuclear weapons due to miscalculation. And however small the risk of each individual scenario may be, one should also consider the cumulative risk of all the possible dangers arising from additional nuclear proliferation. The prospect of a nuclear “accident” or miscalculation would, therefore, be much higher in a proliferated world, as tensions between India and Pakistan have demonstrated in the past. The Middle East is probably a different case, mainly because Israel and Iran are not geographically contiguous states, nor do they constitute an existential threat for the other side (although many Israelis would take issue with that statement).

Waltz also argues that “Israel’s regional nuclear monopoly has long fueled instability in the Middle East. It is Israel’s nuclear arsenal, not Iran’s desire for one, that has contributed most to the current crisis. Power, after all, begs to be balanced. What is surprising about

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the Israeli case is that it has taken so long for a potential balanced to emerge." He also suggests that "Current tensions are best viewed not as the early stages of a relatively recent Iranian nuclear crisis but rather as the final stages of a decades-long Middle East nuclear crisis that will only end when a balance of military power is restored." This is a rather surprising statement. Israeli policies and actions, especially in connection with the Palestinian problem, often have had destabilizing consequences for the region, but its "nuclear behavior" can hardly be described as irresponsible or destabilizing (this doesn't imply, of course, that efforts for a NWFZ in the Middle East should be abandoned). As a result, the only full-fledged effort to acquire nuclear weapons by a Middle Eastern state was motivated by Saddam's regional ambitions, not concern about Israel's nuclear arsenal.

Similarly, Tehran's current security policies, including its strong interest in the development of a nuclear weapon capability and its regional aspirations, antedate the Islamic revolution and are rooted in Persian nationalism and the country's historical sense of regional leadership, not Israel's nuclear capability. Iran's nuclear programme is also motivated, among other, by some legitimate security concerns, including the experience of its war with Iraq, when Iraq used chemical weapons on a large scale against Iran with the international community protesting very weakly, and fears about regime survival. Post 9/11, influential groups inside Iran were concerned that the U.S. intended to change its regime by force. Indeed, it is possible that the Iranian leadership reached the conclusion that if a regime was considered by the U.S. as a member of the 'Axis of Evil' and did not possess a nuclear capability, a fate similar to Saddam Hussein's could be expected, whereas if the country did have a nuclear weapon capability, like North Korea, it stood a reasonable chance of getting financial support and even regime survival guarantees from the US and the international community. Finally, one should also consider Iranian leadership's distrust towards the West, mainly as a result of a sense of humiliation caused by a long colonial experience.

At the same time it is probably true that since late 2003, with the U.S. entangled in an Iraqi (and increasingly an Afghan) quagmire, draining American resources and reducing its influence in the region and worldwide and in view of the domestic situation in Lebanon and Palestine, a permissive regional environment for spoiling strategies and the lack of a functioning regional security architecture in the Gulf region, the Iranian leadership saw a window of opportunity to increase the country's geopolitical weight and establish Iran as a pivotal regional power. It is possible that the acquisition of a nuclear weapon capability may increase not only Iran's self-confidence but also its propensity for brinkmanship and risk-taking. Iranian official rhetoric, often bombastic in style, will not help in this context.

At the global level, there is little doubt that further proliferation would make the strategic chessboard more complex whilst at the same time multiplying risks and complicating strategic decision-making. There is also growing concern that the open nuclearization of Iran could also, in combination with other negative developments, deal a serious -even deadly- blow to the NPT regime. Although one can speculate whether Iran's nuclearization will be the 'hair that broke the camel's

back', Christoph Bertram rightly points out that 'anyone seeing in an Iranian bomb a key factor which might prompt Saudi Arabia, Egypt or other countries to obtain one as well needs to explain why for 40 years the Israeli bomb has not had that effect.' Waltz agrees that "If an atomic Israel did not trigger an arms race then, there is no reason a nuclear Iran should now" (a rather controversial statement in view of his conviction that the real cause of the Middle Eastern crisis has been the Israeli nuclear monopoly).

The key question remains, of course, whether it is conceivable that under certain circumstances Iran's leaders might decide to threaten or even use nuclear weapons or will deterrence be sufficient to ensure restraint in the case of Iran? Waltz argues that Iranian policy is made not by "mad mullahs" but by perfectly sane ayatollahs who want to survive just like any other leaders and that "Once Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, deterrence will apply even if the Iranian arsenal is relatively small." Richard Haass' question on whether Iran is an imperial power or a revolutionary state is highly pertinent here. Two schools of thought have emerged on those questions. On the one hand, several long-time students of the Iranian strategic culture cautiously suggest that Iran's strategic goals are limited to self-defence and regime survival. According to a Chatham House report, 'Iranian regional foreign policy, which is often portrayed as mischievous and destabilizing, is in fact remarkably pragmatic on the whole and generally aims to avoid major upheaval or confrontation.' Mark Firzpatrick sees no intentional use by Iran, but a higher probability of miscalculation. On the other hand, there are those who regard Iran as an inherently revolutionary state (even using the neo-conservative term 'Islamofascist revolutionaries'), and deterrence, from this perspective, is little more than wishful thinking.

In this author's view, although Iran is in many ways a special case and has often caused problems to its neighbours and beyond, there should be little doubt about Iran's rationality in the foreign policy and security realm, and its understanding of the concept of deterrence. Scenarios regarding the probability of nuclear strikes against Europe or any of Iran's neighbours do not sound especially convincing. Furthermore, the lack of common borders between Iran and Israel alleviates to an extent the possibility of military crisis escalation, a conventional conflict and loss of control during a crisis. A study edited by Ephraim Kam focuses on the day after Iran's nuclearization and examines issues of potential concern including the checks and balances on the deployment and use of nuclear weapons, the socialization of Iranian leadership and high level bureaucracy with "nuclear facts of life" and the common understanding of red lines. However, lack of regular channels of communication between Tel-Aviv and Tehran complicate the situation.

Finally, would Iran transfer nuclear weapons to terrorist organizations? There is no record or proof so far of any NWS providing nuclear weapons to non-state actors. If we accept that Iran is indeed a rational actor, and aware of the possible consequences for its own security should the weapon be traced to Tehran (while having no full control over its employment), it is quite unlikely that its leadership will contemplate the transfer of nuclear weapons to a terrorist organization. Of course, there are no absolute certainties on such matters, but the probability would be extremely low.

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One caveat: the major weakness of this school of thought on both deterrence and weapons transfer to terrorists is that it assumes that there is a central decision making authority in Iran. This may not be the case as Iran's domestic political scene is extremely complex, and actors have multiple agendas. Several centres of power are involved in the design and execution of Iranian foreign and military policy, whereas consensual style and the opaque nature of the decision-making process complicate the situation even further.

Although Iran's nuclearization will not cause a substantial increase in the probability of nuclear use in the region, it remains nevertheless an unwelcome development as it will probably increase regional instability. The world does not need another "finger on the nuclear button". What should the West do? Is there a way out of this impasse? If one accepts that the nuclear issue is very important but not the only or the central issue in the relationship between Iran and the West, then the objective should be the overall improvement of relations, with resolution of the nuclear issue being one of the results of the rapprochement, not a precondition. Military action must be viewed as a component of a comprehensive strategy rather than a stand-alone option for dealing with Iran's nuclear programme (Leaving moral arguments aside, there is concern that under the current circumstances an Israeli attack would be of limited effectiveness in destroying all the intended targets, counter-productive in the long-term in stopping the Iranian nuclear programme and very costly because of Iran's asymmetric response). Furthermore, sanctions -which, in their latest form, appear to be "biting"- should continue to be used as a tool of pressure against Iran, but the critical component of the West's strategy should be engagement.

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There is an urgent need to address the regional security vacuum and try to create a new comprehensive regional security system in the Gulf region.

Christoph Bertram and several other scholars have made a rather convincing argument that a nuclear issue-focused strategy and the 'demonization' of Iran have inflated the value of these capabilities, and strengthened the hardliners. The West, it is argued, should "return to a sense of proportion" and "re-enlarge the zoom" of its relations with Iran, which is too important for the West to be reduced to the nuclear issue. Other issues and problems in relations with Tehran should come into the equation in a 'grand strategic bargain' to resolve all outstanding questions. A key question, therefore, is "what are the topics that should be discussed"? What are Iran's priorities and expected gains from such comprehensive negotiations with the U.S. and Europe?

Iran does not want to be seen as a pariah state and which is accordingly diplomatically and economically isolated. It is also argued that in order to solidify recent strategic gains, Iran needs to reach a compromise with the U.S., as well as its Arab neighbours. Therefore, key issues on the Iranian agenda would probably include the re-establishment of diplomatic links, which would offer much-sought legitimacy to the regime, the normalization of relations with the U.S. and the EU, acknowledgement of Iran's regional role (although this would almost certainly cause strong reaction from Arab Sunni states, especially Saudi Arabia and should not be done at the expense of other countries), some type of guarantees for regime survival, and access to Western (mainly European) sources of investment.

The willingness of the West to engage Iran into diplomatic talks across the board, without any preconditions, should be re-expressed as unequivocally as possible. Common interests and opportunities should clearly be presented. The emphasis should be placed on the possible gains for all sides involved. At the same time, a number of 'red lines' should be clearly defined (admittedly, not an easy exercise) and presented to the other side, as well as the possible costs of the continued confrontation, including the cost of missed opportunities.

Of course, even if Western governments are willing to engage into such a unilateral diplomatic exercise, it will not be easy to sustain the process in the absence of a positive Iranian reaction, which may not be immediately forthcoming given that Iran's domestic political scene is extremely complex, and actors have multiple agendas. Several centres of power are involved in the design and execution of Iranian foreign and military policy, whereas consensual style and the opaque nature of the decision-making process complicate the situation even further. And time is more than ever a critical factor, whereas it remains unclear how developments in Syria may influence the Iranian issue.

One should also explore the merits of the idea put forward by Gareth Evans who proposed the abandonment of the 'zero enrichment' goal in favour of a 'delayed limited enrichment', with the wider international community explicitly accepting that Iran can enrich uranium domestically for peaceful nuclear energy purposes. In return, Iran would agree to phasing in that enrichment programme over an extended period of years, with major limitations on its initial size and scope, and a highly intrusive inspections regime (the proposal for the creation of a regional/multinational enrichment centre should be re-introduced). Thus, the Iranian regime would be able to both claim to its domestic audience that it did not yield to U.S. pressure, while simultaneously appearing as a responsible power on the international scene.

Finally, beyond resolving the nuclear impasse, there is an urgent need to address the regional security vacuum and try to create a new comprehensive regional security system in the Gulf region. A number of confidence-building measures could be discussed such as:

- a regional security forum, with annual meetings for heads of states, foreign, defence, finance and interior ministers;
- prior notification of and exchange of observers in exercises;
- joint exercises and arrangements for disaster relief in the case of natural and man-made disasters;
- Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) for the prevention of incidents between naval and air forces respectively;
- joint Search and Rescue (SAR) arrangements;
- cooperation regarding trafficking, drug-trade, and border security issues.

Europe's experience with similar arrangements, although in a quite different context, could be useful in

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the early phases of discussions for a regional security system. In this context, it has also been suggested that, as there are strong local and regional dynamics, Gulf states should begin to take ownership of the regional security process and put forward local initiatives.

The international community’s negotiating strategy should consist of a skilful synthesis of readiness to

accommodate Iran’s legitimate concerns and integrate this important country into an inclusive regional security system, accompanied by concrete incentives, together with reasonable timetables and a clear understanding of the possible consequences for Tehran if it continues its spoiling actions in the Gulf region and the wider Middle East.

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