Iran: 

A True Security Dilemma?

The thesis of this paper is that there is a substantial basis to believe the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Islamic Republic of Iran need not derail U.S. efforts to obtain its basic security objectives in the Middle East (e.g. the prevention of terrorism, secure corridors for the transportation of oil to global markets and progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). There is no known evidence of a state giving a nuclear capability to a nonstate actor to support its national security.

The paper notes that U.S. intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan precipitated Iranian reactions, including development of a nuclear weapons program, which pose challenges for international security. These developments enhance the strength of the Iranian regime against certain threats like the use of conventional military power. Using theories developed by proponents of the school of realism in international relations policy, the paper proceeds to show that the U.S. can still pursue its basic security goals in the region successfully.

While nuclear weapons threatening U.S. interests are daunting, counter measures against them and steps to prevent proliferation are not certain to succeed. Parties involved in a conflict normally do not abandon working to secure their interests in tactical or low level actions simply because they face opposition (i.e. Taliban has continued its insurgency in Afghanistan despite U.S. state building efforts.). Accordingly, the U.S. needs to pursue balanced policy objectives in a disciplined manner while trying to mitigate the perceived risks from nuclear proliferation. This more balanced approach should be taken with Islamic Republic of Iran. Past nuclear programs and the results of
past international efforts to deal with them indicate how better outcomes may have been achieved in those circumstances and how those lessons learned can be applied in the case of Iran.

International relations scholars from the school known as realism have argued that states are the units which make up the international system. States are the most important actors, because there is no central authority or enforcement organization at the supranational level that can hold states accountable for their actions.¹ This leaves the international system in a state of anarchy in which states are left to act in their self-interest to ensure security.² Security results from the ability of a state to exercise its capabilities within the international system and how power capabilities are distributed among other states within the international system.³ As John Mearsheimer, author of The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, outlines “states pay close attention to how power is distributed among them, and they make a special effort to maximize their share of world power”.⁴ Like any other state in the international system, the Islamic Republic of Iran is preoccupied with maximizing as much power as necessary to guarantee the day to day security of the regime and preserve its place in the current international pecking order.⁵

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, President of the United States George W. Bush proclaimed that Iran, Iraq and North Korea were part of an “axis of evil”.⁶ This statement effectively conveyed to the world the administration’s advocacy of regime change in all three countries. This policy and botched intelligence reporting on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programs led to the invasion of Iraq. American power is now required to assure Iraq does not become a failed state. This extension of U.S. power undertook
another democratic state building effort similar to the one already underway in Afghanistan. The proposed establishment of two democratic states which maintain sympathetic, dependent relationships with the United States fundamentally changed the way power would be distributed in the region and created a sense of vulnerability within the Iranian regime. The U.S. state building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan came to be viewed as a massive alteration of the current distribution of regional power and a threat to the continued existence of the current Iranian regime.

From the perspective of the Iranian regime, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are obvious threats to its continued security for three reasons. First, the United States put the most powerful conventional military force in the world on both sides of the Iranian border. Arguably, this gives the U.S. the strategic geographic position, manpower and weaponry to carry out its stated policy of regime change as it could attack simultaneously from Iran’s Eastern and Western borders. With U.S. officials having already carried through with their policy of regime change in Iraq, it would not be farfetched for the Iranian regime to view U.S. military movements as the preparatory framework for a conflict with Iran.  

Secondly, the U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan gives the United States a new check on the Iranian regime’s strategic exercise of power. The gap between the military, economic and diplomatic capabilities of the United States and Iran is significant. As renowned international relations theorist Kenneth N. Waltz points out, states (units) that form the international system are ultimately “undifferentiated” by their function”, but they are substantially differentiated by their “greater or lesser ability for performing similar tasks”. Fundamentally, the Iranian regime does not have the collective
economic or military capabilities to frontally challenge U.S. power which arguably inhibits Iranian actions against its neighbors.

Third, as a result of the adverse policy of the U.S. against Iran, it was not an option for the Iranian regime to seek to align itself with the United States to maintain its day to day security. As a less powerful or secondary state, Iran had two options. It could seek to align itself with another regional power (China, Russia, India) that in all likelihood would deter the U.S. from engaging it in a conflict, or it could develop offensive nuclear weapons which would in effect give the U.S. pause prior to any military action. Iran has creatively combined these two options into a brilliant hybrid approach which successfully deters the U.S. and other states from exercising their military options or otherwise fully leveraging gains from the exercise of conventional military power in the region. These moves by Iran have created challenges for the implementation of U.S. policy in the region. U.S. strategic goals include, in addition to those noted earlier, stability and the deterrence of tensions in an effort to concentrate on its state building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As Robert Jervis astutely notes, "The fear of being exploited most strongly drives the security dilemma". As outlined above, the Iranian regime has legitimate reasons to fear exploitation by the United States. The offensive movements of the United States designed to increase its security by overthrowing the regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan consequentially decreased the security of the Iranian regime. Iran has already adapted to protect its security as noted above. As a result, the U.S. and Iran find themselves trapped in a position popular among international relations theorists known as the security dilemma. As John Mearsheimer puts it “The best defense is a good offense”.
In order to develop a good “offense”, the Iranian regime has sought to increase the state’s absolute power through the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Absolute power remains fundamentally distinct from relative power. Unlike relative power, absolute power cannot be defended against. As Waltz points out in *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, when nuclear weapons are involved “if no state can launch a disarming attack, force comparisons are irrelevant”. Once Iran achieves an offensive nuclear weapons capability, the comparative advantage of relative (conventional) capabilities or relative gains of the U.S. become unimportant. The U.S. may be physically able to defeat Iran using conventional capabilities, but the likelihood that it would do so becomes severely reduced once Iran successfully obtains nuclear weapons. In any potential conflict the U.S. risks facing Iran’s preemptive or retaliatory use of offensive nuclear weapons even if there is a high probability of success. Iran can develop a second strike capability inexpensively to make this threat real. Iran simply needs to increase the likelihood that its “ability to punish” will inflict unacceptable damage against U.S. interests domestically or abroad. Thus, the Iranian regime’s pursuit of absolute power by acquiring an offensive nuclear weapons capability can ensure its day to day security and eradicates many of the imminent threats to Iran’s security posed by the relative capabilities of the United States. The potential for a massive conventional confrontation such as Iraq had with Iran in the 1980’s or as the U.S. has had twice with Iraq is now highly unlikely. The Iranian regime has successfully taken the U.S. policy of regime change effectively off the table.

This is not to say that the Iranian regime is completely uninterested in enhancing its relative capabilities. Recently, the Iranian defense industry unveiled an unmanned
aerial vehicle (UAV) designed to carry out long distance bombing distance bombings missions against adversaries. The cutting edge development of a UAV resembles the UAV’s such as the Predator and Global Hawk that have been utilized by the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for assassinating high value targets in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the U.S. has shot down Iranian drones operating in Iraqi airspace previously. This sporadic conflict with Iran raises a very important question. Does sporadic conflict between Iran and the United States undermine the credibility of Waltz’s views on nuclear weapons?

John Mueller questions in his book, Atomic Obsession Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda, Waltz’s argument that states possess a natural fear of nuclear weapons and hesitate to go to war with other nuclear powers. Instead, he argues that states can be lacking in fear which limits the effectiveness of a nuclear deterrent. Mueller draws the conclusion, “Not only have nuclear weapons failed to be of much value in military conflicts, they also do not seem to have helped the nuclear country to swing weight or “dominate” an area.” Mueller’s explanation leaves a significant amount of uncertainty as to whether or not a state may resort to using nuclear weapons during a conflict, and he argues the devastating effects of a nuclear conflict would not necessarily reach a massive or strategic level. Waltz states below,

“The offensive use of nuclear weapons exponentially increases the uncertainties that abound on a nuclear battlefield. Nobody knows what a nuclear battlefield would look like and nobody knows what would happen after a few nuclear shots were fired. Uncertainty about the course that a nuclear war might follow, along with the certainty that destruction would be immense, strongly inhibits the use of nuclear weapons.”
The acquisition of offensive nuclear weapons by Iran brings more uncertainty into a region which is already plagued with large amounts of instability and uncertainty. If Iran is actively pursuing nuclear weapons as a military option despite sanctions and objections from the United Nations, European Union and United States, it must be reasonably concluded that they possess a reasonable fear of nuclear weapons. Why else would they seek to obtain a military tool which is not of “much value”? Mueller argues the cost of acquiring, maintaining and securing offensive nuclear weapons is prohibitively expensive.\(^{17}\) So why would Iran go to all of the trouble, expense and use of political capital to acquire offensive nuclear weapons? The answer is very simple. By bringing in the uncertainty associated with offensive nuclear weapons, Iran is able to guarantee with a specific level of certainty that the U.S. and its immediate interests would face a “destruction that would be immense”.\(^ {18}\)

The nuclear card does not eliminate the threat of guerrilla warfare or diffuse terrorism from occurring at a tactical level, but it does take off the table the rush to confrontation at a strategic level. The true uncertainty to fear is miscalculating at the strategic level. Strategic conflicts of any kind between the U.S. and a nuclear armed Iran are a very dangerous proposition. The U.S. would have to weigh the overwhelming uncertainty with the potential gains, because as Mueller spends a third of his book pointing out, the U.S. possesses an innate fear of nuclear weapons.

Conflict between the United States and a nuclear armed Iran becomes one of a greater calculated aggression a concept introduced by John Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer states below.
“In short, great powers are not mindless aggressors so bent on gaining power that they charge headlong into losing wars or pursue Pyrrhic victories. On the contrary, before great powers take offensive action they think carefully about the balance of power and how other states will react to their moves. They weigh the costs and risks against the likely benefits.”

The United States is not going to trot simple mindedly into a prolonged military conflict with Iran, because the U.S. knows that it would not be supported by its allies or the larger international community. Mearsheimer points out that states will make mistakes in calculating their capabilities for dealing with conflicts due to “imperfect information”, “how their military forces will perform, and “the resolve of opposing states”. The U.S. has already miscalculated at a strategic level the ability of its military to successfully complete the state building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, received false intelligence on Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) capabilities, drastically underestimated the resolve of the opposing forces in Afghanistan and Iraq which have evolved into prolonged insurgencies. These failures have left the United States with a malodorous stigma that resonates throughout the international community indicating incompetence when attempting to exercise power in order to improve its security. Thus, U.S. credibility for conducting any strategic military operation against Iran in order to preempt its nuclear weapons program would likely be regarded as suspect, politically unpopular domestically, and would probably not eliminate the desire of the Iranian regime to acquire offensive nuclear weapons. Also, the U.S. could ill afford the damage that Iran could do to its state building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq by increasing the training that it provides to insurgents using its Quds Force (Special Forces). The Quds Force is reputed by U.S. forces to have provided explosives and guerilla warfare training to insurgents. Skirmishes between U.S. and Iranian military forces will continue to occur
on occasion (mostly along borders), but they do not have a lasting effect on the status quo or provide an incentive for Iran to comply with U.S. counter proliferation efforts. Calculating the costs and benefits of entering into a prolonged conflict with Iran is a very dangerous proposition and it is highly likely that Iran will still possess an offensive nuclear weapons capability or the expertise to render U.S. counter proliferation efforts unsuccessful.

Mueller and Waltz both agree that counter proliferation efforts that seek to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other states have not been successful over the last half century. However, Mueller asserts that states must “not simply have a desire, to go nuclear”, but must have a true “determination” to pursue nuclear weapons which requires strong support from the leadership. The factors for determining what can be considered strong support for a nuclear weapons program are ambiguous. This is especially true when one considers most of the nuclear weapons programs are developed in secret to prevent potential enemies from ascertaining the true capabilities of the state. Iran has followed this model perfectly by continually denying the existence of an offensive nuclear weapons program. Thus, the credibility problem the U.S. has resulting from the botched intelligence it used to invade Iraq is the same problem it faces when it claims that Iran is attempting to acquire offensive nuclear weapons today.

Two prominent examples of the covert battle between the U.S. and Iran have received a significant amount of media attention. First, Iran was caught by the United States, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and others within the international community operating a covert nuclear facility at Qom, Iran. The Qom uranium enrichment facility was not provided to the IAEA as required so international inspectors
could ensure Iranian compliance with United Nations Sanctions and international nonproliferation obligations. As shown in the images below, Iran has gone to great lengths to keep its nuclear program secret by building underground facilities designed to make it harder for any preemptive strike to eliminate its nuclear weapons program.
The first image taken on February 5, 2000 by Geoeye shows no construction at the Qom site. The second image taken on August 24, 2009 shows heavy construction of underground facilities.
According to Jane’s Intelligence Solutions, the Qom facility is surrounded by underground facilities, surface to air missile defenses, military bases and a potential weapons test site. It would seem logical to argue per Mueller’s assertion that Iran’s leadership has a true “determination” to spend a significant amount of money on developing an offensive nuclear weapons capability or something which strongly resembles such a program. Secondly, the U.S. has been accused of kidnapping Iranian scientist Shahram Amiri and torturing him for intelligence information regarding Iran’s covert nuclear program. After weeks of denying allegations posted on the Internet alleging Mr. Amiri was in the United States, U.S. officials finally acknowledged that he had originally defected for a lucrative financial package. However, he returned to Iran
after fleeing from U.S. authorities in order to see his family, discarded his newly found fortune, and simultaneously publicly discredited U.S. counter proliferation efforts further.

Mueller articulates that much of the success thought to be attributed to U.S. counter proliferation programs is actually false. For example, he cites Libya’s declaration in 2003 that declared their nuclear weapons program, but when inspected by the IAEA, most of the materials were still in boxes and had not been formalized into an actual program. Mueller argues the nuclear proliferation program in Libya was simply a front for incentivizing the U.S. to provide Quadaffi with a modern economy as a reward for giving up its nuclear weapons program. Libya did not have a real nuclear weapons program to be deterred by U.S. counter proliferation efforts. Mueller cites Quadaffi’s willingness to give up its nuclear program in 1999, but it was rejected at the time by the Bush administration. Similarly the nuclear program developed in South Africa in the 1980’s was given up not due to success of the counter proliferation programs, but the threat and cost of maintaining the nuclear force led to the dismantling of the program. Counter proliferation efforts have not been successful and will likely not cause Iran to dismantle its nuclear program.

Ultimately, the United States needs to prepare for the eventual reality that Iran will acquire offensive nuclear weapons. The lack of an international consensus against Iran requires a refocusing of American power from preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons to one of how to deal with the Iran in the aftermath. Waltz says, “the gradual spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared”, but Mueller disagrees with this proposition by saying “although proliferation probably doesn’t make very much difference one way or the other in most cases, on balance it is probably not
all that great an idea”. There seems to be a great sense of hesitation in this statement especially when one considers Mueller’s position that nuclear proliferation is irrelevant and that states would benefit more by investing in conventional weapons that could be utilized during a conflict. Proliferation by regimes which are viewed to be unstable by others raises the danger for more miscalculations to occur prior to undertaking preemptive military action, but there is no proven method by which to effectively keep the proverbial nuclear genie in a bottle.

The abysmal failure of U.S. counter proliferation programs has caused many to investigate the limited utility of military counter measures and counter strike strategies. International relations theorists such as Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press have argued that the U.S. nuclear force needs to undergo a transformation, because the effectiveness of the deterrent which prevailed during the 20th century may no longer be relevant. Lieber and Press argue “the U.S. threat that the United States might issue—to destroy cities if enemy leaders brandish or use nuclear weapons—is a poor foundation for deterrence”. Instead they recommend the creation of a counterforce which allows the U.S. to minimize casualties in coordinating a nuclear response to a nuclear attack. Their interpretation of deterrence is fundamentally flawed, because it takes the uncertainty out of a nuclear response and treats nuclear weapons as though they were conventional weapons. If Iran knew with some degree of certainty that the U.S. would not respond to a nuclear attack on its military forces with the potential wipeout of an Iranian city, it would allow them to engage the U.S. as well as other states in limited nuclear warfare. Secondly, they argue that the location of missile silos in conjunction with today’s improved accuracy of military weaponry could be utilized to destroy the
remaining missile silos. The problem with this logic is that there is no certainty that the 
U.S. would have located all of Iran’s nuclear weapons facilities or those nuclear 
weapons would penetrate Iran’s underground bunkers pictured above. By firing upon 
nuclear weapons silos even in a retaliatory fashion a state runs the risk of being struck 
once again by a nuclear missile from an unknown silo. The entire principle behind 
deterrence is the threat to take away from any potential adversaries what they hold 
most dear. As Waltz puts it, this “ability to punish” is what puts the so called fear of total 
annihilation and prevents states from immediately resorting to warfare. Iran knows at 
the end of the day if it uses nuclear weapons against the United Stated or its interests 
the likelihood that a couple of its major cities will suddenly disappear in a nuclear 
mushroom cloud is extremely high. This is what would keep Iran from making use of its 
nuclear arsenal against the U.S. or its interests.

However, Waltz, Lieber, Press agree that the U.S. needs to maintain an arsenal 
that is capable and credible of functioning properly if need be. The distinction between 
the three perspectives comes in the fact that calculating the U.S. ability to destroy Iran 
does not depend upon a specific number or precision capabilities for using nuclear 
weapons. The nuclear force has to just be credible enough of being more likely than 
not to function properly if necessary. This is why the Iranian regime is pursuing nuclear 
weapons in the first place, because by possessing even one offensive nuclear weapon 
they deter other states from undertaking strategic action which fundamentally threatens 
their security. Similarly, the sheer number of U.S. nuclear forces forces acts as a 
credible deterrent against Iran. The U.S. deterrent is not dependent upon micro 
precision targeting capabilities, and unless there is sufficient evidence to prove the
overwhelming majority of U.S. nuclear forces do not function properly, their deterrent value need not be questioned. U.S. nuclear forces are reviewed and certified annually by the directors of the U.S. Department of Energy laboratories in a letter to the president as part of the Stock Pile Stewardship Program.\textsuperscript{30} The nuclear threat posed by Iran is one which does not necessarily threaten the day to day security or autonomy of the U.S.

The U.S. has yet to establish without a shadow of a doubt that Iran obtaining nuclear weapons will pose a new threat to its national security, self-interest or the national security of other states. Scholars, critics and politicians have suggested that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons would essentially give the U.S. designated terrorist organizations it supports a nuclear capability.\textsuperscript{31} This purportedly linear relationship is very difficult to establish, because there is no known evidence of a state giving a nuclear capability to a non-state actor.

As cited by multiple scholars, including Waltz and Mueller, the United States was overly worried that Pakistan’s acquisition of nuclear weapons would give non-state actors a new tool to use in obtaining their political or religious goals.\textsuperscript{32} However, this did not happen in Pakistan even though members of Pakistan’s elite Inter-Services Intelligence agency are suspected of cooperating and assisting U.S. adversaries such as Al Qaeda. Militants have so far been unsuccessful in obtaining a nuclear weapon due to safeguards put in place by the Pakistani government. The same inability of non-state actors to acquire nuclear weapons is likely to occur if Iran obtains nuclear weapons. No country wants the use of one of its nuclear weapons to be traced back to it, because the country of origin would face retaliation from U.S. This is something Iran would not want to face, and they have already gone to great lengths to secure their
current nuclear program. There is no reason to suspect that nuclear material would simply disappear into the hands of a terrorist organization sponsored by Iran in the foreseeable future. Iran has a high incentive to keep track of its nuclear material, because there are domestic organizations that would like to violently overthrow the current Iranian regime in support of a more conservative or liberal government. The threat of annihilation from abroad or domestically acts as a double-edged sword which incentivizes the regime to properly maintain and secure their nuclear weapons in order to ensure the continued preservation of their security and self-interest. This largely debunks U.S. claims that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons poses a direct threat to its national security.

There has been a great deal of speculation among international relations scholars and political strategists as to whether or not Israel would conduct a preemptive strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities as it did Iraq in 1981. Israel’s conventional strike against Iraq’s nuclear facility effectively eliminated the imminent threat, but it failed to eliminate the possibility that Iraq’s regime might possess enough motivation to once again pursue nuclear weapons. Similarly, Israel bombed a suspected Syrian nuclear facility in 2007 that was thought to be assembling nuclear bombs for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).
The bombing of a nuclear weapons facility poses great political and military risks. The attacker must make sure that retaliation is not possible. Waltz makes an important distinction between two stages of nuclear development which directly influence the success of preemptive strikes. First, a state may be in the early stage of nuclear development in which it is unable to make nuclear weapons. The second stage is the advanced stage in which a state is able to produce nuclear weapons and its production capacity may remain unknown. A preemptive strike becomes increasingly risky as a state enters the second stage of development because the likelihood of a nuclear response is greatly increased. Syria and Iraq were both in the first stages of nuclear development, because neither one had successfully achieved the detonation of a nuclear weapon. Syria’s nuclear weapons program was also not housed in hardened underground facilities. As the satellite photos above demonstrate, Iran has gone to great lengths to learn from the previous mistakes of Iraq and Syria. Iran has concealed its nuclear weapons program in
underground, hardened facilities in an attempt to prevent a preemptive strike from becoming a viable military option for the United States or its allies. Even with the advanced relative capabilities of the U.S. military, it is highly unlikely a conventional preemptive strike would be able to penetrate Iran’s underground facilities. The only option left on the table would be to utilize offensive nuclear weapons as part of a preemptive strike. This is not a logical or rationale option, because the U.S. would further discredit itself, risk nuclear retaliation from other nuclear powers and further spread nuclear weapons.

It is also highly likely that Iran is has already entered the second stage of nuclear development because of the government’s close relationships with Syria and the DPRK. The DPRK has successfully detonated a nuclear weapon that carries the same destructive force as the atomic bomb dropped by the U.S. on Hiroshima, Japan during World War II. The DPRK and Iran’s closeness combined with their common enemy of the United States substantially increases the likelihood the two countries have shared nuclear weapons technology. Iran and the DPRK have a documented history of sharing sensitive intelligence, military information and both received assistance from Pakistan’s A.Q. Khan Network which helped develop their nuclear weapons programs. The risks for conducting a preemptive strike against Iran, a country that may possess nuclear weapons, is likely not a politically or military viable option.

Israel asked outgoing President George W. Bush for authorization to conduct a preemptive strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities in 2008. Israel needs U.S. military support to conduct such an operation, because the U.S. controls all of Iraqi airspace which would have to be utilized in order to support such an operation. President Bush declined
to support an Israeli incursion against Iran’s nuclear facilities, because the likelihood for successfully destroying Iran’s nuclear program was very low and the probability of retaliation against U.S. ground forces in Iraq and Afghanistan was significant. Even if Iran’s nuclear weapons program could be preemptively destroyed, the conventional response of the Iranian regime against U.S. and Israeli interests at a tactical level would be devastating. Due to the inability of the U.S. to adequately ascertain through intelligence mechanisms the extent of the Iran-DPRK exchange relationship, a preemptive strike may result in an unexpected unconventional response triggering a nuclear war. Too much time has passed since the decision by President George W. Bush not to support the Israeli preemptive strike or any such strike to be successful. The Iranian regime has had plenty of time to make preparations and plan for a surprise attack, and they have had time to allow their nuclear weapons program to further develop greatly increasing the likelihood that they are in the second stage of development and increasing the potential costs that they could impose against any aggressor.

The true security risk that faces the U.S. is further alienating the international community because of the outspoken demeanor of the U.S. against Iran. The U.S. had a very similar attitude of condemnation towards Pakistan and India when they detonated their first nuclear weapons. After the fact, the United States implemented sanctions which ended up straining relations with two countries that would become vitally important to its national security strategy. Pakistan is one of the U.S.’s primary allies in fighting transnational terrorism and trying to successfully eliminate the threat posed by non-state actors. India has one of the largest emerging economies in the world, and
the U.S. has sought to implement a nuclear fuel exchange agreement with India in order to limit their dependence upon crude oil in exchange for civilian nuclear power.\textsuperscript{40} Sanctions so far against Iran have been completely ineffective in deterring its nuclear ambitions. Perhaps the U.S. should consider undertaking a more comprehensive and constructive approach in its dealings with Iran by flexing its relative power. The U.S. has largest economy in the world and could use it as the basis for formulating a better relationship with Iran.\textsuperscript{41}

Engaging Iran in a similar fashion as the U.S. has done with India may prove beneficial. This is not to say that the U.S. should advocate or condone Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, but it should accept the fact that its counter proliferation programs have largely failed. Overtly engaging Iran in a regional dialogue on other issues besides nuclear proliferation may change the perceived threat the U.S. poses to the Iranian regime. It may give the Iranian regime a sense of confidence which it currently lacks that will relieve the need to prove itself as a regional force to be reckoned with.

There are more direr problems in the world than than Iran’s attempts to acquire nuclear weapons. One of the most recent tragedies to strike would be the torrential flooding occurring in Pakistan leaving millions without power, adequate sanitation and food.\textsuperscript{42} Keeping the Pakistani government intact should be considered a strategic importance to the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan especially when one considers it is where top Al Qaeda and Taliban members are thought to be hiding and planning attacks. The U.S. needs to reestablish itself as an example for the world to follow and as a diplomatic leader by promoting true cooperation against transnational terrorism and advocating for the descalation of hostilities against Iran.
Iran’s hybrid strategy includes forming strategic partnerships with many of the world’s other leading powers such as Russia and China. Promoting the U.S. counter proliferation agenda with Russia and China has not had the desired effects of deterring Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons. Instead, the U.S. has gravely underestimated the potential fallout from furthering diplomatic tensions with Iran. The U.S. has largely used up its political capital with other countries such as China and Russia in order to get them to agree to United Nations Security Council sanctions.\(^4^3\)

The U.S. needs to acknowledge that Russia and China possess significant economic and financial interests in the continuing stability of the Iranian state. For example, Iran just started fueling its civilian nuclear power plant that was built by Russia.\(^4^4\) Iran and Russia have plans to build more civilian nuclear plants in the future. The U.S. selectively did not deem this a threat to its counter proliferation agenda, because it was designed for civilian purposes only. In addition, the U.S failed to apprehend the potential role of the world’s second largest economy the Peoples’ Republic of China (PRC).\(^4^5\) The PRC signed a deal with Iran in 2009 to become the developer of one of Iran’s largest oil field.\(^4^6\) The successful development of Iran’s oil supply is in the PRC’s immediate interest because the emerging Chinese middle class will increase the PRC’s reliance on importation of Iranian oil.

Turkey, a member of the U.S. sponsored North Atlantic Treaty Organization, was also part of an alternative to postpone sanctions at the United Nations Security Council by suggesting Iran could swap half of its low enriched uranium for a smaller amount of medium enriched uranium.\(^4^7\) Turkey is also another key regional ally the U.S. could not afford to lose with potential emerging Islamist issues.
By increasing its proximity to Iran, the U.S. could support a generation of Islamic youth who want to develop the state into one that embodies many Western ideals. The U.S. could accomplish this without the financial costs and human price tag resulting from the democratic state building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. can continue its current stand against Iran but the potential costs of continuing to exercise its relative capabilities for counter proliferation will likely not result in a net gain. It will most likely result in a net loss that weakens the U.S. ability of forcibly implementing its favored policies within the Middle East.

The U.S. has also redistributed the balance of power in the region by providing Israel with many of its power capabilities improving its security. Additionally, the Israeli acquisition of absolute power (acquisition of nuclear weapons) has given them the ability to autonomously protect their interests and provide for their own security, but it
has not dissipated the tactical threats in the region posed by terrorism. In order to combat smaller scale, tactical threats a broader approach to regional security is required. U.S.-Israeli relations should not be the determining factor in how the U.S. structures its regional foreign policy. Instead, the U.S. should try to engage all states within the Middle East and not show selective favoritism to one that it has exempted from its counter proliferation agenda. This double standard does not promote constructive relations between the U.S. and does not help the U.S. carry out its counter proliferation and counter terrorism missions.

The underlying fact is that the U.S. and Iran have several security goals in common. Cooperation has taken place between Pakistani, Afghani, and Irani security forces to secure their respective borders and stop illigal cross border smuggling of narcotics. The opiate trade in large measure is what funds the Taliban and has prevented the U.S. from achieving its state building efforts. Dozens of Afghan, Pakistani and Iranian border guards are killed each year by cross border drug traffickers. The three countries have signed an agreement to share intelligence, cooperate on counter drug operations and form a Joint Planning Cell based in Tehran in order to stop the flow of illigal opiates, weaponry and people. It would seem to be of great benefit to the U.S. to enhance its official or unofficial partnership with the Iranian regime to combat drub trafficking. Halting the counter proliferation agenda against Iran would likely result in tactical cooperation that could assist the failing strategic U.S. objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Iranian acquisition of offensive nuclear weapons does not diminish the ability of the U.S. to implement favored policies abroad. The constricting limits of U.S. power
are tightening because of how the U.S. has chosen to conduct itself unilaterally within
the international community and because of the war in Iraq. If anything, this is what has
damaged the continued ability of the U.S. to exercise power in support of its security.
Nuclear weapons matter and are of great importance despite assertions made by
international relations theorists such as John Mueller, but Mueller is correct in his
assertion that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons will not necessarily trigger a nuclear
arms race.\textsuperscript{49} Even if other states in the region decide to obtain nuclear weapons, it does
nothing more than further deter Iran from taking offensive action. Iran is going to acquire
offensive nuclear weapons despite U.S. counter proliferation efforts, but this acquisition
will not successfully limit U.S. influence. India and Pakistan’s acquisition of nuclear
weapons did not limit U.S. power previously and there is no reason to suspect Iran will
be able to limit U.S. power.

The U.S. can still accomplish its regional objectives by exercising its power over
Iran. By possessing the world’s most powerful blue water navy, the U.S. can ensure the
continued transportation of oil from the Middle East to the rest of the world. The
technological advancement of U.S. naval forces, location of U.S. naval bases in the
Middle East, combined with its other conventional capabilities can be deployed to
ensure the continued transportation of through the Strait of Hormooz. Any Iranian action
which threatens to harm the U.S. interests or the international community, such as
blocking the flow of oil by placing mines in the Strait of Hormooz, would likely result in
further isolation and garner international support for retaliation. Iran’s acquisition of
nuclear weapons does not undermine or eliminate the effectiveness of U.S. to exercise
its relative power in support of its regional objectives. The Iranians still fear U.S. relative power greatly and would be very hesitant to precipitate its manifestation in any form.

Iran maintains significant influence over U.S. designated terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad. Both of these organizations can be utilized extensively by the Iranian regime to conduct terrorist attacks against the U.S., but neither organization has done so. This in large measure may be due to the Iranian regime’s fear of U.S. power at a tactical level. If the U.S. discovered that Iran was backing major terrorist attacks against its interests at home or abroad, it would act tactically to prevent them from occurring. As demonstrated above in the example of the U.S. shooting down the Iranian UAV, the U.S. possesses very accurate tactical capabilities such as missile technology which allows it to tactically strike specific targets without causing large amounts of collateral damage or entering into longer term, strategic conflicts. Such hostile actions by the Iranian regime would not be in line with ensuring their strategic security or their desire to refrain from any possibility of entering into a military conflict with the U.S.

As Niccolo Machiavelli said, “Since it is difficult to join them together, it is safer to be feared than to be loved when one of the two must be lacking.” The love of the U.S. for the Iranian regime is greatly lacking, but the fear of U.S. power by the Iranian regime is not. As long as the Iranian regime maintains fear of U.S. power, the ability of the U.S. to exercise its power will remain largely unaffected, and U.S. security will remain intact.
Bibliography


End Notes


2 Ibid., 105. Waltz argues that no state can truly be sure of the others intentions. This creates an international system filled with distrust leaving states to act in their own self-interest for survival.

3 Ibid., 107-109.

4 John Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 34. Power is not distributed evenly within the international system. Iran does not occupy the most powerful position within the international system in large measure due to its lack of economic and conventional military capabilities. By acquiring nuclear weapons Iran is able to bridge this gap and obtain an absolute capability which sets it apart from the majority of other states in the international community.

5 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 109. Waltz articulates that “states have to do whatever they think necessary for their own preservation”. Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons provides a significant threat to other states, and it guarantees the continued preservation of the Iranian regime. At some point, Iran’s leadership must have reached the conclusion that nuclear weapons were the only option which could alleviate the threats posed by the unknown intentions, capabilities and actions of other states (in particular those of the United States).


7 Project for A New American Century, Statement of Principles, June 3, 1997, [http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm](http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm). Former Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz were members of the Project for A New American Century (PNAC). PNAC advocated the use of U.S. conventional power to forcibly create democracy within the Middle East as noted in Wolfowitz’s statement to the U.S. House National Security Committee regarding Iraq on September 19, 1998. This idea that U.S. power could legitimately overthrow a sovereign state without support from the international community had obviously permeated the senior leadership within the Bush administration. The Iranian regime was well aware of such views held by the senior U.S. leadership and sought to increase its security through the acquisition of nuclear weapons as a deterrent to any offensive use of U.S. power.

8 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 97.


12 Ibid., 142-143. According to Waltz, “Yet, once a country has a small number of deliverable warheads of uncertain location, it has a second strike capability.” Iran will have a second strike capability once the initial investment in its nuclear program yields deliverable nuclear weapons, and it disperses them at secret locations across the country.


Waltz and Sagan, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, 141.

Mueller, Atomic Obsession Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda, 111. Mueller cites the fact that “Israel’s nuclear program has taken up more than 10 percent of its military budget.”

Waltz and Sagan, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, 141.

Mearsheimer, Tragedy of Great Power Politics, 37.

Mearsheimer, Tragedy of Great Power Politics, 38.


Mueller, Atomic Obsession Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda, 114.

“Second site - Iran reveals its Qom enrichment facility”, Jane’s Intelligence Review (October 2009), http://www.janes.com


Mueller, Atomic Obsession Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda, 124-126.


Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The Nukes We Need”, Foreign Affairs 88 No: 7 (November/December 2009), 44.

Ibid., 45-48.

Waltz and Sagan, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, 23-26. Waltz argues that small deterrent forces with a second strike capability are likely to deter states with superior numbers of nuclear weapons. States expose themselves to great risk when calculating the odds of whether or not another state can carry out its threat of retaliatory response. States who act as aggressors bear the majority of the risk and are likely to act “moderately” to avoid potential destruction.


“Cheney asserts Iraq-al Qaeda link,” BBC, August 6, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6533367.stm. President George Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney largely justified the U.S. invasion of Iraq as a preemptive mechanism for preventing Weapons of Mass Destruction from falling into the hands of terrorist organizations. Vice President Dick Cheney repeatedly insinuated a relationship between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi intelligence services that could have allowed them to acquire WMD capabilities. The U.S. invasion into Iraq was specifically undertaken to prevent this purported transfer of WMD knowledge, capabilities, and technology. Cheney’s assertion that Al Qaeda’s Mohammed Atta met with Iraqi intelligence service in Prague has been disproven and no known transfer actually


33Cameron Abadi, “Iran’s Year of Turmoil,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, July 10, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/10/iran_s_year_of_turmoil?page=0,0. The Green Revolution in regime is a movement designed to seek regime change after President Ahmadinejad was reelected. The aftermath included a series of bombings, assassination attempts and arrests of citizens thought to be creating dissension on behalf of Western governments.

34Alon Ben-David, “Suspected Syrian nuclear facility 'resembled North Korean design',” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, October 31, 2007, http://www.janes.com. The first image from Jane’s Intelligence Solutions provided by DigitalGlobe shows an above ground building being used for the initial construction of a nuclear program. The second image shows the facility destroyed resulting from the Israeli attack.


43Russia’s Medvedev raps EU, US sanctions against Iran,” BBC, June 18, 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10348630. The European Union (European Union) and United States passed more sanctions against Iran outside the United Nations Security Council. Russian Federation President Dmitri Medvedev has claimed these sanctions were not agreed upon prior to Russia’s support for U.S.- EU sanctions.


Elise Labott, “Analysis: Turkey, Brazil eager to pitch in on world stage” CNN, May 21, 2010, http://edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/05/21/turkey.brazil.world.stage/index.html. The picture shows President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad holding hands with Brazil’s Financial Minister, Brazilian President LuizInácio Lula da Silva, and Turkey’s President Abdullah Gül and Turkey’s Financial Minister. The picture manifests the depth of Iran’s partnerships with other states which has been gravely underestimated by the U.S. and the willingness of its own allies to maintain unity against its counter proliferation policies. It was specifically staged to show the world an alternative to further United Nations sanctions was possible without the assistance or blessing of the U.S.


Mueller, Atomic Obsession Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda, 91-95.

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