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Building Mutual Nuclear Security with Iran

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Why has a solution to the decade long nuclear stand-off with Iran proved so elusive? Based on ongoing research into the dynamics of nuclear rivalries and the role of trust in international politics, we argue that the main obstacle to solving the crisis over Iran's nuclear program is that neither side believes that it is possible to reassure the other without this reducing their own security. Recent talks in Istanbul suggest that a new path to mutual security might be opening up, but there are still challenges ahead.

A fundamental problem of international politics is that we can rarely be sure whether we are dealing with aggressive or defensive states. Mutual security is possible between defensive states, and aggressors can only be balanced or deterred. But confusing these two types of states carry risks for national welfare and international security.

Imagine for a moment that decision-makers in state A view state B as an aggressor state and respond by building up countervailing military capabilities. This is how Israel, for example, views Iran's nuclear program. It is also how the Bush Administration assessed the Iranian threat, though US intelligence agencies were explicit in their 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that Iran had stopped work on developing nuclear weapons in 2003. In both cases, policy-makers believe that Iran's acquisition of fuel-cycle capabilities is leading inexorably to Iran becoming a nuclear weapons state. And this is seen as posing an existential threat to US and Israeli security.

As a consequence, any level of enrichment on Iranian soil was viewed as a red line in the previous rounds of negotiations. The only way the Western powers believed they could be secure in the face of the Iranian nuclear programme was if Tehran gave up the most proliferation-sensitive aspects of the nuclear fuel-cycle; and they have been willing to apply increasing levels of economic coercion and the threat to use force to achieve this.

If perceptions of Iran's aggressive intent are accurate, then there is no path to mutual security. But what if Iran has been developing the capability to make a bomb, but has not made the decision to actually build a weapon – known as a position of nuclear latency – and if the motivation behind this program is defensive?

The Islamic Republic might want a nuclear hedge in a bad neighborhood; this is an argument the United Kingdom should be familiar with. The ultimate rationale, after all, provided by Tony Blair for continuing with a modernized Trident nuclear deterrent into the 2050s and beyond was that the only certainty in this world is 'uncertainty.' Churchill once described thermonuclear weapons as the 'great equaliser', and given Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's fear that Washington is intent on regime change in Tehran, is it really surprising that Iran wants a nuclear hedge?

But if maintaining some level of indigenous enrichment capability is vital to Iran's security, and this has been a red line for its Western negotiating partners, then Tehran cannot increase the security of the latter (and Israel and others in the region) without undermining its security. Equally, the Western states can only increase Iran's security by allowing it to operate enrichment plants, which they fear could lead to Iran becoming nuclear-armed.

Thus, even if the assumption is made that both sides have peaceful/defensive motives, they are trapped in a vicious circle of spiraling insecurity as each perceives the other's position on the nuclear issue as posing a threat to their core security interests. Put differently, neither has been able to signal their peaceful/defensive motives and intent because the steps necessary to reassure the other side have been seen as too costly to risk if it turns out the other side does have aggressive motives and intent.

Does the new round of talks suggest that there is a way through this impasse which could lead to mutual security? One proposal is that Iran would halt production of 20% enriched uranium at its underground Fordow plant, and reduce its existing stockpile of 20% enriched uranium by transferring it to France and Russia for conversion into fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) – part of a deal that had originally been on the table in October 2009. In return the deal would supposedly legitimize Iran enriching to 3.5% at its Natanz plant, and eventually (at some point in the future) include the roll-back of sanctions. But if Khamenei currently assumes the worst of US motives, then he will likely see these measures as the thin end of the wedge.

Persuading Iranian leaders that such bad faith thinking is unjustified becomes harder when Western governments insist that Tehran was only brought to the negotiating table by the use of economic coercion and the threat of force. This too reflects bad faith thinking. What is missing in Western capitals is an appreciation of how far their own actions have contributed to Iran's feelings of fear and insecurity. The more Western policy-makers emphasise the importance of threats in producing changes in Iranian policy, the more the Iranian leadership will cling to its nuclear hedge, and the more distant the promise of mutual nuclear security will be between the two sides.