STRATEGIC STUDIES QUARTERLY

Fear and Learning in Tehran

What Recent Psychological Research Reveals about Nuclear Crises

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Abstract

Recent psychological research has shown that experiencing fear, if people believe they have *some* control over the source of the fear, reduces their tolerance for risk. Leaders who experience fear of imminent nuclear war thereafter tend to reject these risky policies. Indeed, experiencing the fear of imminent nuclear war will cause leaders to avoid calculated and uncalculated risks. While the United States should work toward a comprehensive solution with Iran, using force would be not only risky but also counterproductive. If Iran developed the bomb, the use of force would be much less likely to succeed than the simplest policy of all: allowing Iranian political leaders to stop this behavior on their own.

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The Iranian nuclear challenge continues to command attention in the news and within the diplomatic community. Despite the continuing negotiations with the Iranian government at Geneva, fierce debate persists over how to respond to the threat posed by the country's nuclear activities. Most experts believe these activities aim to create either a nuclear weapon or the capability to produce one. Some have pushed for a military attack to damage or destroy Iran's nuclear program, worrying that any permanent settlement would allow Iran to develop a secret breakout nuclear capability and continue to advocate the use of force if Tehran falls short of its Geneva commitments.[1] Others have hoped sanctions and diplomacy alone will keep Tehran a great distance from the bomb and believe a final settlement can permanently prevent the regime from developing it.[2] However, both sides share the underlying assumption that if Iran develops nuclear weapons or perhaps even the capability to

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produce them, the situation would wreak medium- to long-term havoc in the Persian Gulf and wider Middle East as Iran pursues its revisionist agenda behind the cloak of its nuclear deterrent.

However, there is another possibility. James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh recently argued that while a nuclear Iran would be most dangerous "at first, when it would likely be at its most reckless, like other nuclear aspirants before them, the guardians of the theocracy might discover that nuclear bombs are simply not good for diplomatic leverage or strategic aggrandizement."[3] The waxing and waning of the Iranian nuclear crisis over recent decades suggests that the country's supreme leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, and his associates are still learning about what nuclear weapons might offer Iran. Indeed, global trends in the conflict propensity of nuclear powers strongly suggest that if Iran developed nuclear weapons, such a learning process described by Lindsay and Takeyh is much more likely than long-term brazen regional behavior.[4] Tehran may try to brandish its newly found nuclear weight around the region, but Khamenei and his associates will quickly learn that nuclear threats do more harm than good. Despite regular warnings that an Iranian bomb would undermine an already fragile Middle East, the fact is since the 1950s, states that have harbored intentions to revise major parts of their status quo—a desire termed revisionist—and have developed secure second-strike nuclear forces have quickly learned that nuclear weapons are not useful for changing their environments. Such states have then accepted their regional order.

One can partly attribute this great nuclear-learning phenomenon to the number and strength of US alliances throughout the world and the presence of adversaries equipped with nuclear weapons. However, nuclear learning mostly results from fear of imminent nuclear war, when leaders of new nuclear weapons states attempt to transform their status quo and cause a nuclear crisis. Recent psychological research has shown that experiencing fear, if people believe they have *some* control over the source of the fear, reduces their tolerance for risk. Beliefs about *no* control or *total* control reduce the effect of fear on risk.[5] Because leaders are likely to believe they have *some* control over whether nuclear war occurs in the context of calculated (i.e., territorial grabs) and uncalculated risks (i.e., inadvertent escalation and/or deliberate nuclear attack), fear of imminent nuclear escalation will tend to make leaders minimize risk and use nuclear weapons for deterrence rather than dangerous coercive strat-

egies.[6] As leaders of new nuclear powers push to transform their status quo, they are more likely to approach the nuclear brink and experience fear of imminent nuclear war.[7] Attempting to transform the regional status quo after developing nuclear weapons involves accepting the risk of a nuclear crisis and nuclear escalation. Leaders who do this and experience fear of imminent nuclear war thereafter tend to reject these risky policies, because the brain subconsciously associates *any* risky policy to the initiator. Indeed, experiencing the fear of imminent nuclear war will cause leaders to avoid calculated and uncalculated risks: land grabs, other *faits accomplis*, ultimatums and other coercive demands, and limited uses of force. Therefore, while the United States should work toward a comprehensive solution with Iran, using force if the regime is not forthcoming would be not only risky but also counterproductive. It would encourage Khamenei to respond with force if he had a bomb and would further encourage him to build one if he did not. If Iran developed the bomb, the use of force would be much less likely to succeed than the simplest policy of all: allowing Iranian political leaders to stop this behavior on their own.

Nuclear Dogs That Have Not Barked

Former Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Robert G. Joseph echoed a widely held belief, when he claimed that nuclear weapons would "embolden the leadership in Tehran to advance its aggressive ambitions in and outside of the region, both directly and through the terrorists it supports."[8] In theory, the more nuclear weapons have spread throughout the world, the more the danger of regional instability should have increased.

However, over the past six decades, nuclear proliferation has caused short periods of instability and conflict that have been followed by longer periods of peace and tentative cooperation. Experience with nuclear weapons and the experience of fear in a nuclear crisis moderates the higher conflict propensity of new nuclear powers.[9] The four years that followed the Soviet Union's development of the ability to target the United States with nuclear missiles in 1959 were the most dangerous of the Cold War.[10] Nevertheless, Soviet challenges to major US interests in Berlin and Cuba substantially declined by 1963. China killed several Soviet troops on the disputed Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri River

in 1969, five years after developing nuclear missiles in 1964. However, China did not challenge Soviet positions in the region again and indeed has not used force against the Soviet Union anywhere since then.[11] After Pakistan developed nuclear weapons around 1990, fatalities in the Kashmir conflict increased from 30 in 1988 to nearly 2,000 in 1992 and more than 4,500 by 2001. During this period, Pakistan fought the 1999 Kargil War with India and engaged in a 10-month mobilized crisis in 2001–02.[12] However, fatalities in Kashmir have steadily declined since then, and by 2012 were almost at pre-1990 levels.[13] Indo-Pakistani relations have slowly but steadily improved as Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh authorized secret back-channel diplomacy that may have come close to concluding a final Kashmir settlement.[14]

International security experts have been unable to convincingly explain this remarkable trend. The first and most credible conventional explanation is that changes in the local or international balance of military power prevented territorial revisionism that was earlier permissible. US, Soviet, and Indian defenses were certainly consolidated after Soviet, Chinese, and Pakistani challenges, which made subsequent attempts at revanchism more difficult. However, no defenses could have prevented further challenges. Pres. John F. Kennedy could not have stopped Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev from attempting to reinstall Soviet missiles in Cuba or issuing further Berlin ultimatums. Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev could not have prevented further Chinese attacks on Soviet positions on Zhenbao Island. In addition, no Indian defenses could have prevented further Pakistani challenges in the rugged, mountainous peaks of Kashmir. The international balance of nuclear and conventional power hardly changed when Soviet, Chinese, and Pakistani challenges ceased.[15] Increased defenses, useful as they are, cannot account for this phenomenon.

A second conventional explanation is that while changes in the balance of military power may not have been very effective, the simple presence of nuclear weapons has been. Nuclear weapons threaten to wreak total destruction out of even limited conflict; so, nuclear powers should behave with extreme caution.[16] While nuclear powers have hardly behaved with reckless abandon, this caution is not immediate and has to be learned.[17] Before Soviet, Chinese, and Pakistani leaders learned to behave with the caution appropriate for nuclear powers, they pursued

policies that carried a real risk of nuclear war. The simple presence of secure second-strike nuclear forces cannot explain this variation: a constant cannot explain variation.

A third conventional explanation is that the undesirability of nuclear war prevents leaders from forcefully responding to regional aggression by nuclear powers. Moreover, the tendency for military organizations to develop doctrines and policies that diverge from the preferences of civilian leaders carries a real risk of accidental or unintended nuclear escalation. New nuclear powers have indeed tended to be dangerous.[18] However, the same experienced nuclear powers have not. Instead, they have accepted major parts of their status quos that earlier were deemed intolerable. Military doctrines have not yet caused nuclear war and have been most dangerous when civilian leaders have practiced revisionism.

Finally, many have pointed toward elite competition within these regimes as a source of their undesirable behavior. However, Khrushchev and Mao Tse-tung were at the peak of their political power within the Soviet Union and China respectively when these states' foreign policies were so dangerous.[19] It is unlikely Musharraf authorized the Pakistani intrusion into Kargil in 1999 as part of a political power grab, and the general controlled Pakistani policy toward India throughout the 2001–02 crisis. Although the regime in Tehran may be highly fragmented, it is likely that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, Khamenei will have as much control over Iranian foreign policy as Khrushchev, Mao, and Musharraf did over theirs. There is an imperfect correlation between elite politics and foreign policies of these states: whereas the former hardly changed, the latter fundamentally transformed.

Fear and Loathing

A more convincing explanation for the moderating effect of experience with nuclear weapons begins with the familiar observation that nuclear weapons are poor instruments for coercive diplomacy.[20] However, the low coercive value of nuclear weapons says nothing about how leaders learn this. Leaders—especially those motivated to revise their regional order—are no more likely to immediately hit upon accurate answers here than they are to immediately learn about the coercive power of other military strategies or weapons. The historical record presented hereafter clearly shows leaders of revisionist states learn about

the coercive limits of nuclear weapons the way most people learn most things: personal experience.[21] It occurs in their own nuclear crisis rather than through a more systematic analysis of their adversary, region, or the historical record. Moreover, their initial belief that nuclear weapons might allow them to realize their otherwise elusive revisionist dreams causes their nuclear crisis. Fear is the relevant variable that causes these lessons about the limits of nuclear weapons over time. Nuclear crises cause enough fear to produce moderation of revisionist, new nuclear powers that no aggregation of military and economic power can realize. Thus, there is a systematic effect of experience with nuclear weapons on a state's conflict propensity.[22]

Numerous studies have found that the experience of fear causes people to reduce their acceptance of risk. Images that are known to cause fear under laboratory conditions, such as images of snakes or the September 11 attacks, routinely cause people to accept less risk in subsequent choices than those not shown the images. People's brains are hardwired to avoid future situations they perceive as similar to those that caused the initial fear experience. If leaders fear imminent nuclear war, they will avoid any policies they believe will likely bring them back to the brink. Leaders' successors will likely also have experienced fear and likely behave similarly. This effect of fear on risk is not generated by any amount of reading of history and is conditional on people believing they have some control over the source of their fear. Unsurprisingly, fear has little effect on risk when one believes they have little control over its source. Why run from the bear if you think you cannot escape it? When people experience fear and believe they have no control over its source, its effect on risk acceptance is slight. However, when people experience fear and believe they have *some* control over its source—as leaders in nuclear crises would—they become extremely unlikely to accept further risks. This risk aversion occurs in those areas that are perceived to cause similarly dangerous situations as those that originally caused the fear in other unrelated circumstances. While these insights come from the laboratory experiments cited above, it is also clear that the effects of fear are substantially greater when the subjects are world leaders rather than undergraduate students and when these leaders genuinely believe they have control over whether nuclear war erupts.

Although it is difficult to measure the experience of fear precisely, the historical record shows that when leaders develop nuclear weapons and

stumble into a nuclear crisis, the fear of imminent nuclear war is necessary for them to radically transform their foreign policies. If they attempt to transform their regional order through some combination of nuclear threats and salami tactics and do not experience fear of imminent nuclear war, they will likely continue with their aggression. A healthy respect for the danger associated with nuclear weapons is insufficient to cause them to reverse course. Knowledge about how nuclear powers might cause nuclear war will not suffice. Leaders must stare down the nuclear brink and expect imminent nuclear destruction within hours or days.

People take time to learn. It took Khrushchev almost four years from the development of nuclear missiles in 1959 to the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Five years passed Mao's first 1964 nuclear test before the 1969 war scare. Pakistan developed nuclear weapons in 1990, and Musharraf did not experience fear of imminent nuclear war until May 2002. Of course, new nuclear powers are not all the same. The Soviet Union, China, and Pakistan differ in many obvious ways. Cold War Europe, East Asia in the 1960s, and South Asia in the 1990s exhibited important differences. Soviet, Chinese, and Pakistani leaders had different grievances and addressed them through different strategies. However, these differences conceal a striking similarity. Fear of imminent nuclear war had similar effects on Soviet, Chinese, and Pakistani aggression. Such fear made deterring revisionism by these powers much easier, because they were less inclined to accept the risk. While before experiencing fear they pursued dangerous policies that dragged them into nuclear crises, afterward they substantially moderated their aggression and largely resolved contested but otherwise unresolved issues. Despite stark differences in culture, ethnicity, history of previous conflict, and leadership personality, the experience of fear of imminent nuclear war was necessary to cause leaders to refrain from nuclear coercion.

Fight or Flight?

The Soviet, Chinese, and Pakistani cases all involved leaders who believed they had some control over nuclear escalation when they experienced fear. It is clear Khrushchev, Mao, and Musharraf had supreme control over their respective countries and would have believed they had real leverage—but obviously not total control—over whether nuclear war occurred. The Soviet, Chinese, and Pakistani crisis years—in the

early 1960s, late 1960s, and early 2000s respectively—might seem to contradict the idea that fear causes revisionist states to back down. After all, these episodes constituted the most dangerous peak of crisis periods that almost plunged the world or specific regions into nuclear war. However, these cases are clear instances of fear of imminent nuclear war moderating reckless foreign policies. Indeed, it is likely that had these leaders not experienced fear of imminent nuclear war they would have continued in their revisionist ways.

Although the Soviet Union first tested a nuclear bomb in 1949, Khrushchev did not obtain the capability to reliably target the United States with nuclear missiles until a decade later.[23] One-way Soviet bombing runs were too vulnerable to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air defenses, and Khrushchev's 1956 Suez crisis threat was all bluff.[24] Nevertheless, the Soviet leader believed nuclear threats would enable him to get his way in the Middle East, West Berlin, Cuba, and elsewhere. According to Khrushchev's son, Sergei, the Soviet leader learned that "the mere mention of nuclear-armed missiles had a powerful effect."[25] Indeed, these years were the most dangerous of the Cold War. In addition, throughout the two Berlin crises, Khrushchev did not experience fear of imminent nuclear war.[26] However, after President Kennedy announced the quarantine of Cuba on 22 October 1962, Khrushchev began to experience fear of imminent nuclear war. He claimed to his presidium colleagues, "We started out and then got afraid. . . . [Moreover,] the tragic aspect is that they might attack and we will repulse it. It might turn into a big war."[27] He likely worried that US forces would prevent the remaining Soviet ships and submarines that advanced toward Havana from proceeding and that Soviet retaliation would quickly escalate to nuclear war.[28] Khrushchev stated to the president of Czechoslovakia on 30 October 1962, "We were truly on the verge of war."[29] He proclaimed in early December 1962, "Of course I was scared. It would have been insane not to have been scared. I was frightened about what could happen to my country—or your country or all the other countries that would be devastated by a nuclear war. If being frightened meant that I helped avert such insanity then I'm glad I was frightened."[30]

Khrushchev learned of the danger of nuclear coercion not from history or abstract theory but from his own personal experience at the nuclear brink. After this experience, he not only refrained from attempting

to reinstall Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba but also accepted the intolerable situation in West Berlin, offered concessions in stalled nuclear test ban negotiations, and accepted milder communist revolutions in Iraq and Laos. Where earlier he lashed out, after experiencing fear, he more passively accepted intolerable changes. Tacit cooperation and confidence building measures replaced coercive demands.

By February 1969, Soviet forward patrolling of the disputed Zhenbao Island had become more aggressive, and fighting had seriously wounded several Chinese troops.[31] After a Chinese retaliatory ambush in March caused 200 Soviet fatalities, Chairman Mao began to worry about a retaliatory Soviet nuclear strike and experienced fear of imminent nuclear war.[32] Extensive underground tunnels were built throughout the country, Chinese leaders were evacuated from Beijing, and military units were placed on high alert. Mao confided to his personal nurse that "China and the Soviet Union are now at war."[33] It is possible that Andrei Grechko, the Soviet defense minister who planned the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia under the pretext of Warsaw Pact training exercises, had threatened to punish China with a nuclear assault.[34] Mao's doctor recalled the August 1969 relocation of millions from the city to the country: "Remaining city residents were mobilized to 'dig tunnels deep' in preparation for aerial, possibly nuclear, attack."[35] That month, Mao concluded that "it is not good for all central officials to assemble in Beijing . . . [because] even one atomic bomb will kill many of us."[36] The evacuation of China's top leaders from the capital shortly followed. He worried the incoming flight carrying Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin, arriving ostensibly to restart negotiations, might turn out to be an ambush and placed specially trained battalions throughout the airport. On 18 October, when the Kosygin flight was expected to arrive, Chinese strategic missile forces were placed on their highest alert for immediate launch. People's Liberation Army units were ordered to a state of total readiness. At a meeting of generals from all regional commands and service arms to address readiness, the term most often heard in the meeting hall was "the coming Soviet surprise attack."[37] On 19 October, Mao's deputy, Lin Biao, remained fixated on the Soviet aircraft that was carrying the Soviet delegation to Beijing, demanding intelligence updates every few minutes and delaying his usual afternoon nap until the Soviet delegates had departed Beijing.[38] After the Kosygin talks safely concluded, Chinese forces were kept at full alert for another six months.

Moscow and Beijing subsequently agreed to conflict prevention and escalation reducing measures, and China has not used force against Soviet or Russian positions on Zhenbao or elsewhere since 1969.[39] Mao seems to have learned of the dangers of nuclear weapons not from history but from his own nuclear crisis with the Soviet Union.

After developing nuclear weapons in 1990, Pakistan had not fought a war with India for almost two decades. However, Islamabad substantially increased sponsorship of the Kashmir insurgency throughout the 1990s, started the Kargil War in 1999, and engaged in a ten-month mobilized crisis with India between 2001 and 2002. After Pakistani-supported insurgents killed 30 civilians at a military camp in Jammu in late May 2002, Indian prime minister Atal Vajpayee threatened Pakistan with an invasion to dismantle terrorist infrastructure. Pakistani president Musharraf responded in late May with three missile tests and threats of nuclear attack against an Indian invasion.[40] By the end of the month, Musharraf "hardly slept . . . [and] feared imminent nuclear war."[41] During his 27 May presidential address to his nation, Musharraf claimed, "Pakistan is currently passing through a critical juncture. We are faced with a grave situation and we are standing at the cross road of history. Today's decision will have serious internal and external effects on our future. . . . Tension is at its height."[42]

On 1 June, in his first public speech after experiencing fear of imminent nuclear war, Musharraf proclaimed that leadership on both sides must realize the very dangerous nature of the situation and that there should be no miscalculation on either side.[43] He subsequently described the May crisis as "very close . . . [and] extremely tense because there were war clouds."[44] In June 2003, he told the *Washington Post* that "two hundred percent, there won't be war . . . [because of] the understanding of the leaders. We've fought three wars and we know the hazards of war."[45] Musharraf made no such claims after the 1999 Kargil War and the December 2001 terrorist attacks on the Indian parliament. Indian and Pakistani English-language newspaper coverage of the South Asian crisis also suggests that Musharraf experienced fear of imminent nuclear war at the end of May 2002.[46] Pakistani newspaper coverage of the crisis during the last week of May was about eight-times greater than coverage in December 2001 when the Indian parliament was attacked. Coverage during the last week of May 2002 was between two-thirds and four-fifths of Pakistani coverage of the Kargil War between mid-June

and mid-July 1999, when the Indian army began to attack Pakistani positions, killed hundreds of Pakistani troops, and recaptured occupied territory.[47] That Pakistani coverage in May 2002 was almost as high as when hundreds of Pakistani troops were being killed in Kashmir at the height of the Kargil War suggests that the May crisis also captured much national attention. Musharraf learned of the dangers of nuclear coercion not from the Cold War or even the history of Indo-Pakistani relations but from his own experience at the nuclear brink.

While violence in the Kashmir insurgency after May 2002 did not disappear, it declined substantially.[48] However, 2012 was almost as dangerous as 1999. Many have argued that this Pakistani about-face was caused in fact by US pressure on Islamabad to rein in its support for Kashmiri insurgents in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the US war in Afghanistan.[49] US pressure on Musharraf indeed occurred during the same period he experienced fear, making it difficult to isolate the role each played in Musharraf's decision-making process. However, the problem with the US coercion argument is that Pakistan did not succumb to US pressure to rein in its support. After Pres. George W. Bush's heavy-handed threats, Musharraf paid lip service to appease Washington and Delhi but offered no meaningful concessions. Pakistani authorities handed no militants over to India, and many of the militants the Pakistanis did apprehend were later released. Moreover, the US coercion argument cannot explain why Pakistan pursued a policy of nuclear threats to realize its Kashmir goals before May 2002 but opted for secret diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and tacit cooperation thereafter. Pakistani policy in Kashmir during the decade since 2002 has simply been much more risk averse than in the decade before. Musharraf's experience of fear of imminent nuclear war in late May 2002 explains the dramatic turnaround.

Terrified in Tehran?

One might argue these findings are not applicable to Iran, due to that country's unique culture and religion and its distinct geopolitical and economic motives to develop nuclear weapons. However, the fact is that almost all states that have developed nuclear weapons have stumbled into a crisis out of inexperience and then authorized more moderate nuclear strategies and foreign policies after a few years' experience. This

"experience effect" in the cases of the United States (in Korea), the Soviet Union (in Hungary), the United Kingdom (in Egypt) and France (in Algeria), cases in the late 1940s and early 1950s, are likely attributable to the early Cold War as well as nuclear weapons. It is not clear that fear played a role here, because the uncertainty associated with the early Cold War drove the conflict propensity of the new nuclear powers. However, all inexperienced nuclear powers since the late 1950s have found themselves in conflicts and wars either trying to revise a status quo (Soviet Union and Pakistan) or preventing and/or coercing a revisionist nuclear power from doing so (India). In China's case, nuclear weapons seem to have emboldened the Chinese to respond more forcefully to aggressive Soviet patrolling of disputed territory. In some cases whether the new nuclear power is revising or defending the status quo is unclear, because many other factors are also changing in a particular region, for example Israel and South Africa. Nevertheless, the fact that countries as different as the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, China in the late 1960s, and Pakistan in the early 2000s exhibited strikingly similar variation in their fundamental choices of coercive or moderate nuclear strategies shows that the great nuclear learning phenomenon knows no cultural or geographic bounds even though these countries exhibit important differences. The effect of experience with nuclear weapons on the central elements of their nuclear strategies over time is striking.

We can predict the general contours of how an inexperienced nuclear Iran would behave based on a careful reading of similar trends in these earlier cases. Many have argued Iranian culture and religion suggest the regime would behave far more dangerously than earlier inexperienced nuclear powers. However, while most Iranians believe a uranium enrichment program is their natural right, public opinion regarding developing nuclear weapons is much more divided. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomenei explicitly stated that Iran should not develop nuclear weapons. While some conservative leaders have spoken of the virtues of sacrifice for the nation, it is far from certain this would cause them to use nuclear weapons or authorize aggressive foreign policies that put the regime and country at risk. Iranian culture and religion are obviously different from those of other nuclear powers, but there are no reasons to expect the regime to be an exception to the historical rule. One might worry Iran would give nuclear weapons to terrorists, but it would have strong incentives not to forfeit control over such powerful weapons.[50]

Others might also argue that Iran's motivation for developing nuclear weapons differentiates it from other cases. Scholars have extensively debated the causes of nuclear weapons proliferation.[51] However, the fact remains, whether those states that have developed nuclear weapons did so because of defensive or offensive geopolitical ambitions, domestic politics, well-endowed science bureaucracies, global isolation, psychological biases, or nationalistic beliefs, leaders in all countries behaved in fundamentally similar ways over time when they were inexperienced with nuclear weapons. The relationship between a state's decision to develop nuclear weapons and what happens after development is tenuous. A partial exception to this rule is the extent to which Khamenei and his associates in the Revolutionary Guard are dissatisfied with the status quo in the Persian Gulf. They likely desire to end their state's regional and global economic and political isolation and to increase their influence over regional affairs and economic development.[52] They may wish to reduce US influence by increasing the cost of US presence in the region. The stronger these desires—either before or after developing nuclear weapons—the greater the likelihood of Iran harassing Persian Gulf tanker traffic, sponsoring Shiite groups around the region to undermine conservative Sunni states, and sponsoring attacks against US troops throughout the Persian Gulf. Iran might issue coercive threats to the United States or its regional allies. While the Iranian army is large, many of its forces are obsolete and are no match for Israeli or US forces in a conventional conflict. Nor would Iran be able to do much to threaten or destroy Saudi oil production.[53] However, if Iran develops nuclear weapons, fear of imminent nuclear war in a crisis is likely to cause Khamenei and his associates to rely on moderate nuclear strategies. Moreover, if an inexperienced nuclear Iran begins to demonstrate hubris in the region, a crisis, fear of imminent nuclear war, and more moderate nuclear strategies will follow irrespective of whether Iranian threats were directed at the United States or its regional allies. Direct threats against the US homeland may cause a crisis more quickly than threats against Israel, Saudi Arabia, or other US regional allies, but the likelihood of a nuclear crisis and the concomitant effects of fear of imminent nuclear war would be the same in both cases.

One can also argue that an Iranian bomb could unravel the nuclear nonproliferation regime. The causes of a Saudi or Turkish bomb and the impact of this on the nuclear nonproliferation regime are separate

questions that I cannot fully address here. However, the literature on the causes of nuclear proliferation suggests that whether an Iranian bomb would cause regional proliferation is far from clear. Policy makers have worried about this ever since Pres. Kennedy worried about 40 nuclear powers in the 1960s, but well into the twenty-first century, the number of nuclear powers remains below 10.[54] For example, while Saudi policy makers have often said they would develop nuclear weapons if Iran did so, much of this is designed to pressure the United States to prevent Iran from developing the bomb.[55] The United States has effectively used a combination of carrots and sticks to prevent many states from developing nuclear weapons, and it is not clear that an Iranian bomb would stop this trend.[56] Finally, one can argue that an Iranian bomb would undermine the global nuclear nonproliferation regime. Again, I cannot fully address that issue here, but the effect of the nuclear nonproliferation regime on states' decisions to develop nuclear weapons is contested.[57] Moreover, it is a stretch to assume that an Iranian bomb would have much effect on distant states' nuclear decisions. An Iranian bomb may well pose challenges to the global nuclear nonproliferation regime that are as similar and surmountable as those posed by the other nuclear powers.

In the long crisis over Iran's nuclear activity, the great nuclear learning phenomenon has all but gone unmentioned. The robust historical trend clearly indicates a need to guard against hasty conclusions that an Iranian bomb would wreak havoc throughout the Persian Gulf and Middle East. If Khamenei evades Israeli bombs and computer hackers, secretly develops nuclear weapons, and attempts to increase the cost of US influence in the region, there is little the United States and its allies could do to stop him short of military attack. Harassing Persian Gulf tanker traffic, undermining conservative Sunni regimes, and sponsoring attacks against US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are not easily deterred. Thus, a growing number of policy makers and analysts have argued that military force should always be an option—one that may well be required if Iran developed nuclear weapons.[58] Nevertheless, an attack would likely cause Iran to double down on its nuclear program and may cause a regional war.

The custodians of any potential Iranian nuclear arsenal face a great obstacle to realizing their revisionist ambitions. Any attempts to reduce US influence in the region would likely cause US and/or Israeli reactions

that would eventually leave Khamenei and his associates fearing imminent nuclear war. Such fear caused Soviet, Chinese, and Pakistani leaders to cease their nuclear saber rattling, and it is unlikely Iranian leaders would react differently. If Iranian leaders believed a nuclear war was imminent, they would do whatever they could do ensure nuclear weapons would not be used. The historical record suggests that under these conditions Iranian foreign policy would come to resemble that of other experienced nuclear powers. It is also likely that Iranian foreign policy toward its other adversaries would show more signs of cooperation and confidence building and less signs of bluff and bluster. It is surely more difficult to establish whether Iranian leaders have experienced fear of imminent nuclear war than it is to count the number of challenges a nuclear Iran could pose to the United States and its partners. However, such an assessment is vital, because whether and how Khamenei and his associates experience fear of imminent nuclear war will determine if Iran throws its nuclear weight around the region and decide the manner in which the regime stops doing so. In the meantime, two broad lessons from the great nuclear learning phenomenon provide a more sober assessment of the situation.

If Tehran develops nuclear weapons, the first lesson is, the United States should not attack Iran. Imposing a nuclear crisis on new nuclear powers hoping to quickly cause the desired effects of fear through US threats or uses of force would be a dangerous mistake, because the desired effect of fear depends on beliefs about control. If Khamenei believes regime change is imminent, he will likely believe he has little control over nuclear escalation and the fate of his regime. He would be most likely to use nuclear weapons under these conditions. If Tehran developed nuclear weapons and attempted to revise the status quo through a combination of threats and smaller uses of force, the United States would not have to do much to cause Khamenei to learn of the limits of nuclear weapons to transform the Persian Gulf. Superior US military power can easily prevent Tehran from sustaining revisions to the status quo. Policy makers should reconsider any intelligence assessments that do not explicitly account for the impact of fear of imminent nuclear war on Tehran's behavior. Assessment after assessment has suggested that nuclear weapons would embolden Tehran to harass Persian Gulf tanker traffic, threaten or attack Saudi oil infrastructure, and increase sponsorship of attacks against US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Khamenei and his associates

may try to do this, but the historical record shows that the workings of the human mind will prevent them from getting very far.

The second lesson is that the United States should not threaten to attack Iran and would do well to announce it would only use force if Tehran first attacked US forces or perhaps those of key allies. US military power is so much greater than that of Iranian forces that if the US deployed forces in the region during a nuclear crisis, the mistrust and suspicion between Washington and Tehran may cause Khamenei to believe regime change was imminent. He would seriously consider using nuclear weapons under these conditions.

The best US deterrence policy would credibly commit to leave Tehran with some control over whether conventional or nuclear war erupts. US military assets deployed to the region should be much better at defending US and allied troops from Iranian challenges than invading and occupying Tehran. Khamenei would be much more likely to believe he had control over nuclear escalation and the fate of his regime during a nuclear crisis if he believed the United States would not attack unless deliberately provoked.

Traditionally, dealing with new nuclear powers has involved some combination of robust extended deterrence policies and threats to use force. However, revisionist new nuclear powers of the twenty-first century are likely to have very weak conventional military power. The dynamics of how people react to fear ensure that US threats to topple the regimes of these nuclear powers pose substantial dangers. The world is fortunate that leaders of new nuclear powers have been educated by fear and restrained their own revisionist ambitions. The United States and its allies must take care not to adopt policies thought to decrease the risk of nuclear war that actually make it more likely. If Iran develops the bomb, the best US approach would allow Iran to experience nuclear fear and learn to curtail their revisionist plans. SSQ

Notes

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