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Red Lines and Green Lights

Iran, Nuclear Arms Control, and Nonproliferation

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Abstract

Cold War–era, nuclear-policy debates focused on the US–Soviet nuclear balance and various loopholes and openings in arms-control agreements that arguably favored the Soviets at US expense. Missing from these debates was due attention to the Soviet goals that would determine the significance of alleged force imbalances and treaty allowances. A similar preference for tangible indicators confounds the United States and its allies as they seek proscriptions (red lines) and prescriptions (green lights) for suspect nuclear programs. Initial efforts to thwart an Iranian bomb focused unduly on setting a red line to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable behavior; the debate over the subsequent Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action has focused inordinately on technical issues and far less on critical assumptions about Iranian motives that will determine whether Iran has appropriate incentives to adhere to the agreement.[1]

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Can the United States and its global partners stop a country from acquiring nuclear weapons? That is the question of the hour for those who seek to forestall an Iranian bomb or worry that *any* new nuclear-weapons state might act irresponsibly, spark a nuclear arms race, or pass nuclear materials to terrorist groups. But what does "stopping" a bomb program actually require? Does it mean freezing nuclear progress—risking that a

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country might break out from an agreement—or even allowing additional nuclear progress under some circumstances? Or, does it require "pushing back the clock" so a government would encounter additional hurdles trying to acquire a bomb at some point in the future?

In applying lessons from strategic nuclear-arms control to the proliferation challenges from today's potential nuclear states, the answers to the questions above are not found in realist writings in international politics, whether offensive or defensive in orientation. So-called offensive realists argue that states reduce security risks by balancing against the capabilities of others: states prepare for what others can do rather than what they *might* do, since adversary intentions are opaque and variable.[2] Although defensive realists respond that states can read and shape the intentions of others and thus allay their security fears by sending signals that a "greedy" state would find too costly to send,[3] these realists typically imply that capabilities are central to state planning; such capabilities provide information for judging another's intentions and remain the basis of security planning. Costly signals are largely based on the reduction and reconfiguration of military forces.[4] However, beliefs about the adversary's intentions must inform thinking about the requisites of nuclear security because assumptions about motives are critical to threat assessment, an adversary's capabilities are deficient guides to policy, and nuclear weapons are peculiarly destructive.[5] In small or large quantities, these weapons fuel uncertainty about their potential aggressive purposes, given options that are ostensibly available to nuclear-armed states.

This article discusses the role of presumed intent in US–Soviet strategic nuclear-arms control. It maintains that US Cold War–era, nuclear-policy debates focused deceptively on imbalances, treaty loopholes, and openings in agreements to cheating when those debates were fundamentally based on opposing beliefs about Soviet goals and tolerance for costs and risks. Absent due attention to these goals, doves and hawks alike were drawn to useful but inadequate metrics that tended to confuse and oversimplify critical issues.[6] The article concludes that Cold War–era conceptual tendencies beset current US efforts to set red lines to forestall an Iranian bomb and, conversely, to give green lights through agreement to specified Iranian nuclear activities. Policy makers and analysts (henceforth, policy makers) employ metrics that are inevitably deficient and misleading to understand and address policy problems that critically center on Iran's intent.

Lessons from US–Soviet Strategic Nuclear Arms Control

Knowing whether and when the requirements of nuclear deterrence were met—the points at which US security was reduced, maintained, and enhanced—confounded standard setting against the Soviet nuclear threat. US policy makers attended to key measures of US and Soviet capabilities and treaty loopholes and openings that the Soviets could exploit; they attended less to Soviet motives that determined the stability of any red lines drawn and green lights granted to Soviet nuclear acquisition.[7]

Throughout the Cold War, US doctrine for acquiring, configuring, and deploying nuclear forces evolved with the changing US–Soviet "nuclear balance." Whereas the Eisenhower administration planned for a one-sided nuclear war that would obliterate the Soviet Union because the latter enjoyed some conventional-force advantages in Europe but little capability to retaliate to a US nuclear offensive in kind, the Johnson administration devised the doctrine of Assured Destruction (AD) because the United States could no longer disarm the Soviet Union in a preemptive strike or satisfactorily limit damage to the United States in a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. As articulated in the mid-1960s, the doctrine supposed that deterrence was secure if the United States retained the capability to destroy the Soviet Union—specifically, its cities—under any and all conditions, including a surprise "bolt-from-the-blue" Soviet attack. In the decade to follow, the Carter administration embraced "war-fighting" principles—the assumption that nuclear war, like any war, could be fought to advantage and therefore requires weapons to counter enemy weapons, destroy Soviet war-making capabilities, and hit specific Soviet targets of value (the "countervailing strategy")—when improving capabilities made selective responses and "counterforce" tactics plausible options. Subsequently, Reagan officials took these principles to require a US capability to "prevail" in nuclear war, in stressing the virtues of an upgraded US offense and the complementary potential of exotic defenses, which the Strategic Defense Initiative promised to deliver.

US policy makers could not agree, then, on a standard for gauging Soviet deployments and behavior and thus whether the Soviets had approached, or crossed, a red line that threatened US security. Drawing from AD principles, US policy doves took comfort in the deterrence potential of the surviving legs of the US triad—the mobility and eva-

siveness of the substantial US bomber and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) force upon which the United States had come to depend. Drawing from war-fighting principles, US policy hawks insisted, however, that the United States had to push for nuclear advantage to raise the costs to the Soviets of arms competition and war. The facts that the Soviets had deployed land-based missiles at a much higher-than-expected rate through the 1960s and into the 1970s[8] and were not mimicking US deployments by distributing nuclear weapons evenly among air-, land-, and sea-based legs led hawkish analysts to conclude that the Soviets were seeking superiority and planned—at least in war—to go on the offensive.[9] Why else would Soviets seem so unconcerned that their land-based missiles were vulnerable to a US counterattack?[10] Some hawks concluded, in fact, that the Soviets sought a "war-winning" capability and that the United States must follow suit.[11] In their view, the US land-based missile force was increasingly vulnerable to a Soviet first strike that would effectively disarm the United States. With the decimation of the US land-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force, the United States would be left without the counterforce capability to promptly destroy remaining Soviet land-based missiles (that could threaten US cities) in their hardened silos.[12]

Similar disagreements confounded efforts to build (green-light) allowances into strategic nuclear-arms treaties. In consequence, arms-control debates pitted administration officials and supporters who focused on key US benefits against those who highlighted Soviets benefits and opportunities to cheat under one treaty or another. Advocates promoted the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty as a stabilizing agreement that would restrict nuclear tests to the underground test environment, slow and potentially halt nuclear proliferation, and build US–Soviet cooperation to facilitate further agreements. Treaty critics claimed, in response, that the Soviets might explore exotic means to cheat—maybe testing weapons in deep-outer space—and would eventually resume atmospheric tests, at an advantage. Whereas the Soviets could supposedly maintain their necessary testing capabilities through edict (given authoritarian Soviet governance), US test capabilities would suffer as scientists moved to greener pastures, resources were invested elsewhere, and laboratories fell into disuse. In the following decade, advocates praised the 1972 Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) I and 1979 SALT II treaties for imposing ceilings on offensive nuclear

weapons; critics responded that the treaties froze in US disadvantages upon which the Soviets could capitalize further when they formally or effectively renounced the SALT II Treaty. Although the SALT II Treaty capped the number of multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV) atop ICBMs, US treaty critics warned that the Soviets could double, maybe triple, the capabilities of their land-based force by exceeding the SALT II limitations that were programmed to expire in the early 1980s. They warned incessantly of the "window of vulnerability" that would open in the early 1980s when the Soviets could target their MIRVs against the considerably smaller number of US land-based missiles. In the final Cold War years, advocates trumpeted the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty for banning an entire class of weapons, that is, land-based cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. Critics feared that—absent a strategic arms reduction treaty—the Soviets would hide, rather than destroy, their intermediate-range missiles or replace them with retargeted Soviet strategic nuclear missiles, maybe built for that purpose.

To hawkish critics, then, US security was endangered as long as the Soviets acquired "unilateral benefits" under a treaty and retained options for subterfuge. Hawkish analysts presumed the worst of Soviet furtiveness. In the 1980s, they decried the Soviet encryption of telemetry information—electronic transmissions that revealed missile and warhead performance in testing—even questioning whether the Soviets were providing false information on open transmission channels.[13] They read all Soviet violations of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABMT) as evidence the Soviets were building a nation-wide defense to break out from the ABMT, though Soviet actions were far too limited and the challenge of building an effective missile defense far too great to position the Soviets to thwart a US nuclear offensive,[14] and the United States had also committed treaty violations.[15] The failure to find evidence in obvious places only reinforced hawkish misgivings. It suggested to critics that the Soviets knew what they were doing: they were hiding illicit activities by feeding the misconceptions of the US intelligence community.[16] Treaty proponents begged to differ, of course, but neither set of advocates overcame the issues of the moment to identify the precise requisites of US nuclear security. Nor could they have done so by focusing, as they did, on the physical aspects of the US–Soviet nuclear balance.[17] Their disagreements were actually grounded in diverging assessments of Soviet

objectives and the risks and costs the Soviets would willingly accept to accomplish their goals. Indeed, a fuller examination of Soviet objectives would have exposed the failings of the standards that these advocates readily accepted in evaluating US-force capabilities under various arms-control proposals.

In the name of war fighting, the United States could conceivably have accepted relatively low hardware and damage-infliction requirements given the view of most war-fighting proponents that nuclear wars were "unwinnable" and would end through coercion, not force—that is, with threats to destroy targets of value not the actual destruction of them. Hawkish analysts would most definitely have disagreed, insisting that more, not less, weaponry was required. But these hawks' standard for sizing and configuring US forces left essential questions unanswered. Why would the Soviets start or provoke a nuclear war given the offsetting costs they would incur, alone, from the collateral effects of US counterforce strikes? Why would the Soviets suppose that their superiority gave them a coercive edge when US policy makers were determined to resist, had thousands of nuclear warheads available for that purpose, were convinced that a nuclear war was unwinnable by *either side*, and were aware that the United States—like the Soviet Union—could always attack the adversary's cities? Why would the Soviets believe that any limitations were possible in a nuclear conflict? Would not a belief that military advantages are to be had, and limitations were impossible to enforce, provoke the parties to hit first, hard, and often—indeed, hit everything, again and again?[18]

Likewise, following AD principles, the United States could conceivably have "destroyed" the Soviet Union—assuredly—by lowering damage "requirements." These requirements were set in the 1960s by the destruction that US forces *could efficiently inflict* without duly considering what the destruction of the Soviet Union actually meant given Soviet cost tolerance. But AD advocates across the policy spectrum sought options through enhanced US counterforce capabilities—accurate, responsive weapons for destroying Soviet hard targets—to compete quantitatively and qualitatively with Soviet armaments. Even the US Defense Department under Robert McNamara, to whom the doctrine is credited, planned to engage primarily in counterforce strikes against Soviet military targets—that is, to match US against Soviet military capabilities. For some, the hope was to acquire the means to fight the

Soviets on their "own terms;" for others, the hope was to hedge a bit on the AD commitment by acquiring—via these weapons—a prompt, precise signaling capacity should war occur. What was missing, however, in scaling and configuring the US force was more general reflection on the conditions that would precipitate a nuclear conflict, underlying Soviet goals, and how these might affect Soviet responses to US war-fighting tactics.[19] Under any and all conceivable circumstances, the United States had the nuclear capabilities to accomplish realistic objectives and far more capabilities than were necessary to accomplish most any of them, including the destruction of invading Warsaw Pact troops in Europe, the Soviet military infrastructure, and, with time, the residual (unlaunched) Soviet ICBM force.

Despite converging hardware preferences, US policy makers battled relentlessly over the strategic consequences of various nuclear balances and shortcomings in agreements. Potential US disadvantages included a Soviet edge in sheer megatons, missile throw-weight, heavy land-based missiles, and alleged Soviet capabilities to hide mobile-missile stocks, quickly outfit missiles with additional warheads, and provide false information to US intelligence. These debates could not be settled, however, by pointing to treaty safeguards, offsetting US advantages, or US response and retaliatory options. A US consensus was elusive because reconciling diverging positions required a convergence in thinking about Soviet goals and accompanying cost and risk acceptance. Tellingly, existing metrics lost their meaning, and a reconciliation of competing positions occurred, when events provoked hawks to reevaluate their thinking about Soviet goals. The Soviets had convinced US policy makers across the US ideological divide that fears of a Soviet attack were unwarranted by accepting the double-zero formula and onsite inspections of the 1987 INF Treaty and agreeing to reduce their land-based missiles, trim their MIRV potential, and accept intrusive inspections as formalized in 1991 under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. No less importantly, the metrics lost their meaning, though the structure of the Soviet nuclear force had not significantly changed.[20]

Throughout the Cold War, then, a focus on material considerations distorted logic, despite the great attention to a modest conceptual challenge. In seeking nuclear stability, the United States had a good sense of overall Soviet nuclear capabilities and possessed survivable weapons in numbers and varieties that would confound Soviet efforts to alter the

force balance quickly to achieve a meaningful advantage. By comparison, nuclear nonproliferation efforts have drawn less attention to a relatively large conceptual problem. In combatting proliferation, the United States and its allies must identify proliferators, assess those proliferators' technological progress and likely acquisition levels, and determine how nuclear aspirants might employ their weapons when questions remain about the game-changing capacity of a single nuclear weapon. A proliferator might use one or more weapons coercively, irresponsibly, or accidentally. It could hand a nuclear weapon off to a terrorist group, or it could elevate all of these dangers by provoking additional states to acquire nuclear weapons. Given the resulting intellectual challenges, the temptation endures to neglect underlying intentions and focus, instead, on the material aspects of the challenge.

Halting Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Iran

As was true in US–Soviet arms control, policy makers draw proscriptions and prescriptions to halt nuclear proliferation *implicitly* from the intentions of the suspect country. Although Iran's intentions inform all debate, even experts obscure the central issues by structuring these red lines and green lights *explicitly* around key metrics.

Drawing Red Lines to Unacceptable Nuclear Activities

The policy debate *appears* to rest on concrete criteria for determining dangerous levels of nuclear progress. Such progress fuels a controversy among nonproliferation experts and concerned policy makers: at what point should a country be considered a significant proliferation threat and, therefore, where should states place red lines that, when crossed, signal a clear and present danger perhaps requiring a forceful military response? The issue of line setting is perplexing, in part, because a country can adhere to the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), maintain robust enrichment capabilities, *and* position itself to acquire nuclear weapons once renouncing its NPT obligations. Discussion and debate center on three basic standards.[21]

First, a line can be set at nuclear testing. In this regard, Jacques Hymans argues that the NPT generally embodies the best standard—the performance of a *nuclear test*—for judging whether a country has crossed a critical threshold toward becoming a nuclear-weapons state.[22] The test-

ing standard has the advantage of requiring that countries *demonstrate* a nuclear-weapon capability given the regularity with which states have announced their nuclear-weapon programs with tests; the potential for test failures such as those in North Korea; the reality that countries, including Japan and possibly South Korea, acquire fissile-material stockpiles without intending or deciding to go nuclear; the useful warning that a test by a country provides before it stockpiles bombs and makes them deliverable; the uncertainties of judging progress in earlier (pretesting) stages of a nuclear program; and the incentive that earlier thresholds give states to acquire nuclear weapons—since they are presumed "guilty" when crossing those thresholds. Thus, as a consistent feature of nuclear-weapon development and a shiny bright signal, with an undeniable meaning and impact, the explosion of a nuclear device overcomes challenges of perception and uncertainty for parties that must monitor a country's nuclear progress from a distance.

Many of these arguments hold up to criticism. Although critics argue, for instance, that a state can acquire a nuclear-weapon stockpile, as Israel did, without ever having tested a weapon, the Israeli case might well be unique. As Jacques Hymans and Matthew Gratias conclude, testing is virtually inevitable in a nuclear program: current nuclear aspirants lack the will and capability to duplicate Israel's "bomb in the basement" strategy of secretly deploying nuclear weapons without ever testing them.[23] Iran, for one, would likely test a device to ensure it works (repetitive testing has been the country's hallmark in ballistic missile development) and to advertise the country's nuclear prowess for deterrence benefits. It might do so recognizing that its fragmented government would undercut the broad consensus that makes the strategy work. Critics also maintain that a state can hide the true purposes of a test by claiming that it had peaceful purposes. Backing these claims, the global reaction to India's 1974 *peaceful* test was notably tame in comparison to the reaction to India's 1998 *military* test.[24] Assertions that a nuclear test is peaceful are likely to remain unpersuasive, however, when made by countries like Iran that have invested heavily in delivery systems and heretofore denied seeking nuclear weapons. Critics maintain, moreover, that a state can move rapidly from a successful test to weapons that might then be hidden or used. Again, the strategy might produce little net gain. After any such test, a country might confront considerable developmental

challenges—in a lengthy process of trial and error—before acquiring a deliverable weapon.

The most compelling retort to the testing standard is that aspirants could gain an edge by acquiring and hiding large amounts of enriched material before a test explosion. Iran could position itself, then, to build a multiple-warhead nuclear arsenal—following the North Korean model—by hiding, shielding, and dispersing its enriched material and bomb-making and delivery capabilities from any military retaliation that a nuclear test would invite. Indeed, Iran could conceivably stockpile uranium, construct a number of less-efficient nuclear devices, and test one to ensure it works. Having dispersed its nuclear materials or devices and acquired a weapon reserve to guard against retaliation, it could proceed then to develop more-efficient warheads. Iran could benefit after a bomb test, from the large array of targets an attacker would have to hit in a preventative strike to set back the country's nuclear-weapon program—as compared to the smaller number of perhaps more vulnerable targets (plutonium-based reactors, uranium-enrichment facilities, and so forth) that could have been hit in the earlier enrichment phase. For that matter, Iran might benefit from a post-test, global hesitancy to attack Iran given residual uncertainty about the actual extent of its nuclear program, its vulnerability to attack, and the strategic implications of targeting *nuclear weapons*.[25]

Given these limitations, some critics have explicitly and implicitly proposed an alternative threshold: the possession of a significant quantity of fissile material. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a 2012 United Nations General Assembly speech, set the red line for Iran at the accumulation of medium-enriched uranium sufficient for one bomb. With a significant quantity of material presumably most of the hard work has been done; by comparison, the transition from a significant material quantity to nuclear-weapons status is relatively short, unproblematic, and unobtrusive. The fissile material can be hidden somewhere, for as long as necessary, until it becomes part of a deliverable weapon. Still, critics rightfully ask whether a significant quantity of material is the real issue. After all, some nonnuclear weapon states possess sizable material stockpiles or could acquire them quickly with the necessary infrastructure in place. Although global attention has focused, for example, on Iranian stocks of 20-percent enriched uranium that could, with further enrichment, supply material for a bomb, enlarging these

stocks is no more a proliferation threat than expanding centrifuge capacity for producing low-enriched uranium. The latter could eventually fuel a large nuclear arsenal.[26]

With the risks and limits of the more technical standards, hawkish critics of US policy have insisted that countries like Iran cross the critical line *early* through actions that impugn their stated peaceful intent, such as reneging on NPT obligations.[27] When North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003 and Iran suspended its observance of the Additional Protocols (though not legally bound by them) in 2006, the international community was thereby placed on notice that these countries had "bad intent" and would pursue their nuclear options. These critics are inclined then to set lines *somewhere* before the hardening, dispersal, or development of a suspect nuclear program renders it impervious to destruction.

This approach to line drawing fueled the very public US–Israel dispute over the wisdom of attacking Iran—sooner rather than later—to destroy its nuclear infrastructure. Israel set red lines for using force earlier than is warranted from the US perspective. The divergent reasoning of the United States and Israel reflected their relative exposure to an Iranian bomb and the greater vulnerability of the Iranian nuclear infrastructure to a US attack as compared to an Israeli one.[28] Israel's red lines would keep the Iranian program ostensibly within reach of Israel's destructive capabilities, as Israel lacks the logistical and deep-penetration capacities of the US Air Force—for example refueling and bunker-busting abilities. Israel's fear, shared by US policy hawks, has been that Iran is playing for time—to take the Iranian program beyond some point of no return—by making false promises and feigning compromise. Although, under Israeli and domestic pressure, the Obama administration responded by pledging that the United States would not tolerate a nuclear Iran, the administration left itself some wiggle room, and Israel ultimately chose to placate its more powerful ally.[29] The latter conceded—by default—that an attack on Iran would occur on the US timetable, as dictated by US capabilities and threat assumptions.

Setting the red line around the limits of preventative-strike capability assumes, however, that outside parties can judge the location and vulnerability of key sites when nuclear-weapon programs are hidden from scrutiny. These programs involve activities that "take place in secret on computers, in small shops and labs, and in bunkers and un-

derground, and they may not be revealed until long after the program has been terminated."[30] It could also push these parties to act despite being highly uncertain about the suspect country's intent given the ambiguity of available information. In the Iranian case, the evidence was sufficient to convince the US intelligence community, as evinced in its 2007 national intelligence estimate, that Iran ceased work in 2003 on its nuclear-weapon program. Indeed, Iran had subsequently allowed the international monitoring of its uranium enrichment facilities and kept enriched uranium amounts below a threshold—even before it agreed to extend the limits and increase transparency in late 2013 under an interim agreement. But observers also had grounds for more dire conclusions. Iran only admitted to constructing enrichment facilities at Natanz and Qom after these sites became known, continued to expand its uranium-enrichment beyond the country's energy needs, and maintained an active program to develop ICBMs.[31]

Danger exists in overreading the signals in noncooperation.[32] Moving against noncooperating states has a significant downside if requiring that the United States and its allies shun rule violators when engaging them instead could reveal options, generate useful information, and overcome misunderstandings.[33] The chances for compromise are hurt when parties view outcomes in zero-sum terms, lock into their positions, and fail to see the conflict from an alternative perspective.[34] A lack of informational access can cause outsiders to exaggerate a threat. So it was with the now infamous October 2002 national intelligence estimate, *Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction*.[35] Used to justify the 2003 war in Iraq, the report expressed the general view within the US intelligence community that Iraq had substantial holdings of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and was reconstituting its nuclear program.[36] Bush administration officials, who ardently believed that Iraq had WMD, reinforced this view. Accordingly, they trumpeted impugning evidence, readily accepted the intelligence agencies' judgments, and implicitly established a standard of proof that inhibited professionals from challenging the administration's conclusions.[37] Post-mortem assessments established, however, that US intelligence was a captive of the belief that Iraq had not destroyed its illicit weaponry and production capabilities.[38]

Given differing and ambiguous threshold positions, and the *limitations of all of them*, whether (not just under what conditions) the United States might strike Iran remains an open question. The Obama ad-

ministration's stated red line—not allowing Iran to acquire a "nuclear weapon"—leaves doubt about exactly *when* the United States might act militarily to disrupt a suspect nuclear-weapon program.[39] The administration certainly has good reasons to avoid specificity. Risks exist to the line drawer when much remains unknown about the target's intentions and capabilities and the full effects of acting on a threat. Explicitly articulating a red line unintentionally signals to the target that it can snuggle up to the line or leads the target to doubt the line drawer's resolve.[40] The line drawer places itself in the position of having to act, when challenged, mainly to preserve its credibility.[41] These liabilities were on display when President Obama warned, in August 2012, that the United States would not tolerate the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government to suppress rebel forces. Although Obama did not specify the amount of chemicals, the level of certainty, and degree of government complicity that would trigger a US response or the timing and nature of the US response, he opened himself to charges that he had undercut US credibility in Syria and beyond by failing to respond forcefully when finally conceding that the Syrian government might have used chemical weapons. The equivocations of the administration in setting a clear red line for the Iranian nuclear program are thus an understandable response to the difficult challenges of deterring and compelling adversaries in international politics. But they also stem from its struggles to respond to a difficult question, "What kind of Iranian nuclear program can the administration accept, and under what conditions?"[42] The answer rests on assumptions about Iranian intent.

Certainly, relative capabilities inform the red-line debate. While proponents of a precipitous US military strike against Iran's nuclear assets accentuate the dangers of delaying an attack, opponents emphasize the confounding implications of an attack and the incompleteness of the military solution.[43] After an attack, Iran might have an even greater incentive, and public backing, to reconstitute its program (an attack will set back a program not end it), seek a nuclear weapon, engage in terrorism, and act aggressively to undermine the attacking countries' regional positions. For that matter, Iran would have even less incentive, after an attack, to open the country to inspections, which would, from their perspective, assist the future targeting of Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure. But capability considerations are only part of threat as-

sessment, and not typically the biggest part given the range over which presumed intentions can vary.

Thus, the essential disagreement among policy makers, and states, is not over the disutility of force or the precise criteria for determining nuclear-threshold status—however critical these criteria might appear. More important to policy makers are the *nature* and *urgency* of the threat—whether, how, when, and against whom a country might use a nuclear weapon. For them, the underlying issue is whether decisive preventative action is required—and sooner rather than later. The specifics of progress fuel debate but remain at most a secondary concern.

Policy makers who doubt that nuclear weapons serve Iran's strategic ambitions (except under dire circumstances, such as deterring an attack) prefer vague, faint, or distant lines based on a belief that Iran has little reason to pursue nuclear weapons. They argue accordingly that Iran has expanded and maintained its regional influence effectively through nonnuclear means, including its support for Hezbollah and other regional militant groups, and has shown little desire for a *direct* military confrontation with Israel, the region's only nuclear power. They argue also that the principal threat to Iran's leadership is internal, not external. Thus, in opting to acquire a bomb, Iran's leaders must accept continuing sanctions that could weaken the leadership's grip on power. Furthermore, Iran will pay a prohibitive price should it target or threaten its powerful adversaries with nuclear weapons. The United States and Israel are unlikely to back down and will certainly retaliate—perhaps with annihilative force—if attacked.

Policy makers who argue that nuclear weapons serve Iran's objectives instead prefer proximate red lines, though these policy makers might argue over exact line placement. Pushing the line back, perhaps far back, are those who believe that nuclear weapons serve more traditional purposes—that is, that nuclear weapons would allow Iran to acquire status by joining the exclusive global club of nuclear-armed countries and to deflect major security threats that include Western-imposed regime change. Moving the line forward, perhaps considerably so, are those who maintain that a nuclear Iran *would* use its weapon(s) to harm the country's adversaries (regardless of the retaliatory consequences) or, at least, to coerce other states and pursue regional aggression with impunity. Unsurprisingly, Israel has shown zero tolerance for any nuclear program in a hostile Middle East country, as demonstrated by its precipitous attacks

on Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 and Syria's al-Kibar nuclear facility in 2007 and its hardline position toward the Iranian program. Hard to ignore, from Israel's perspective, is that Iran's leaders have called repeatedly for Israel's destruction and that Iran has strongly supported militants in Lebanon and Gaza and a Syrian regime that have targeted Israel directly.

The point is that important indicators of nuclear progress fuel debate but do not determine the essential positions of policy advocates. Why else has Iran attracted global attention when Japan and South Korea have more developed nuclear infrastructures and, by various metrics, present the greater proliferation threat? For that matter, why were India and Pakistan, despite their alleged nuclear aspirations, allowed to stand outside the proliferation regime, and why, after the Indian nuclear test, did the George W. Bush administration sign a civil-nuclear agreement with India? The answers obviously are that the United States and its allies consider motives when determining which countries deserve exceptional scrutiny and the timing and form of any retaliatory measures. The metrics, in shifting attention from critical assumptions about these motives, can well serve as a distraction.

Giving Green Lights to Nuclear Activities

Nuclear-proliferation experts recognize that restrictions can work in tandem to foreclose the options of potential proliferators, even those that remain determined to maintain a nuclear infrastructure. The solution resides in a diverse range of measures that include limiting uranium stocks and imports of critical technologies; restricting the numbers, sophistication, and configurations of centrifuges and the production and reprocessing of plutonium; continuous monitoring of known nuclear facilities and intrusive inspections of suspect sites; and exchanging relevant information among national intelligence agencies and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. For their part, arms-control experts recognize importantly that a verification system can work despite its imperfections. Negotiators need not close every loophole or strive for a fully verifiable agreement. Even a small probability of detection is adequate for enforcing an agreement if the monitored party is risk averse or highly values the benefits of the agreement. Thus, monitoring a portion of the fuel cycle well, or multiple portions less well, can strengthen an agreement by *increasing the chances* of detecting a violation. The odds of detecting noncompliance only improve when interdependencies exist

between a permissible and illicit program that could expose irregularities or diversions of labor, material, and supplies or when any discovered violation can trigger more rigorous or exhaustive inspections or impugn the monitored party's adherence to jeopardize the agreement.

The fact remains, though, that even reputedly exhaustive measures are always incomplete. Although the negotiators focused on the specifics, assessments of the progress and outcome of negotiations with Iran thus required a reading of its current and potential goals.

Negotiating with Iran

Iran's unwillingness to offer meaningful concessions in nuclear talks fueled controversy over their pace and substance. Indeed, Iran largely controlled the negotiations through drawn out bargaining with the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany), the IAEA, and assorted other countries, including Turkey and Brazil.[44] The Western powers strove in the mid-2000s for a comprehensive settlement that would constrain Iranian nuclear options, seeking a deal that would end Iranian enrichment and commit Iran to tight safeguards. Iran tried to keep its options open, however, by eschewing specifics, narrowing commitments to particular facilities and points in time, and tying "concessions" to nonnuclear issues.[45] With the resumption of the P5+1 talks in February 2013, Iran proved unwilling to respond in any detail to Western proposals or to schedule a follow-up meeting when the talks ended without agreement.

Of course, Iran's outward cooperativeness increased considerably when, in mid-2013, Hassan Rouhani assumed the Iranian presidency. By year's end, his outreach to the West, eleventh-hour compromises, and hard bargaining produced an interim agreement (the Joint Plan of Action)—the first respite in the Iranian program since negotiations began a dozen years earlier, a period in which Iran's holdings increased from a couple of hundred to almost 20,000 centrifuges. As a step toward a comprehensive agreement, the six-month deal froze and rolled back critical portions of the Iranian nuclear program. Under the terms of the deal, Iran had to halt the installation of new centrifuges, cap low-grade (5-percent) enriched-uranium production, cease work on a heavy-water reactor, deplete stocks of 20-percent enriched uranium, and accede to

daily inspections of its nuclear facilities. In exchange, Iran received only modest financial concessions: limited reduction of some sanctions and access to some frozen funds.

In pronouncing their country's right to enrich uranium, Iran's negotiators still edged closer to the demands of the country's hard-liners than to the positions of P5+1 negotiators; the latter insisted that Iran significantly reduce its enrichment capabilities, shut down its enrichment facility at Fordow and heavy-water reactor, account for its full range of prior nuclear work, and accede to far-reaching inspections. So, the actual significance of Iran's concessions in the negotiations would remain unclear. As Iran's defenders could note, the Fordow complex was a logical place for an enrichment facility because it was hardened to a preventative attack; an expansive enrichment program would allow Iran to meet "future" nuclear-energy needs; the increased transparency from nuclear inspections should reduce the need for constraints on Iranian enrichment; Iran should not have to compromise its nuclear programs without actual sanctions relief; and so forth.[46] For that matter, Iran could create doubts about its sincerity in these talks by complying with some, but not all, of the terms of the interim agreement. It required that Iran address the IAEA's concerns over the country's prior nuclear activities, which Tehran had long resisted.[47]

After weeks of arduous bargaining in which Iranian negotiators allegedly withdrew prior concessions and increased their demands, a breakthrough of sorts occurred in early April 2015 with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), intended as a step toward a more detailed agreement.[48] The framework's strenuousness exceeded the expectations of many skeptics in requiring that Iran

1. reduce its number of centrifuges from around 19,000 to 6,000 and then limit enrichment activities, for 10 years, to roughly 5,000 older and less-efficient (IR-1) centrifuges operating in a single (the Natanz) facility;
2. reduce its stockpiles of low-enriched uranium from 10,000 to 300 kilograms;
3. forgo uranium enriched beyond the 3.67 percent levels required to fuel a nuclear power plant, for a 15 year period;
4. restrict the hardened Fordow complex to research, involving no fissile material for 15 years;

5. convert the Arak nuclear reactor, to reduce its plutonium production, and forgo plutonium reprocessing;
6. accept far-ranging inspections under the Additional Protocol; and
7. acknowledge the contingency of sanctions relief on Iran's compliance with an agreement.

As always, the devil was in the details, and these were largely unsettled. The parties had agreed on a short, joint text for public release but that each side could separately publicize the agreement's specifics as "fact sheets" without the prior approval of the other. Although some residual ambiguity is typically necessary to overcome differences to forge international agreements (especially involving sensitive, domestic issues), the extent of the discrepancies between the US and Iranian specifics—or, at least, the unwillingness of one or both parties to own up to their concessions—led many critics justifiably to wonder whether the agreement would truly curtail Iranian options.[49] Even major issues remained unresolved. Iran had not agreed to export its uranium stockpiles or inalterably convert them to prevent their reuse in a bomb program, destroy its unused centrifuges, ban advanced centrifuges (for "research") from the Qom facility, or allow full and permanent access of inspectors to all suspect (including "military") facilities. It also insisted on immediate sanctions relief with the signing of a final agreement and the end to all controls with the expiration of the agreement.

So, the question stood, did Iran's obstructionism amount to inflexibility or, instead, to good (hard) bargaining?[50] More generally, the question for those negotiating with Iran remained, "Will Iran foreclose its nuclear options?" Answering both questions left the negotiators tying ambiguous evidence to their own assessments of Iranian intent.

The July 2015 Agreement

The basic differences in perspectives and interests proved challenging to overcome. In the ensuing months, old issues resurfaced and new issues emerged. Each side accused the other of backtracking, and deadlines for an agreement came and went. In July 2015, after a week of dashed hopes that a deal was "imminent," the negotiators delivered a detailed agreement that largely built on the April JCPOA. Among its provisions affecting Iran, the agreement

1. retained the framework's limit on centrifuge numbers over a 10-year period (now, with a staggered [8.5-to-15–year] schedule for introducing advanced centrifuges at Natanz, the only permissible enrichment site for the 15-year period);
2. limited low-enriched uranium stocks to 300 kilograms, severely curtailed plutonium generation, and prohibited plutonium reprocessing capacities for the same 15-year period;
3. permitted inspectors access to all suspect sites, with a dispute-arbitration process under the effective control of a Western voting majority;
4. delayed the loosening of sanctions until Iran's initial compliance was confirmed by the IAEA; and
5. outlined a process permitting sanctions to "snap back" into place with evidence or suspicions of Iran's noncompliance.

In return, Iran could challenge inspections of suspect sites and delay access for a matter of weeks; would receive an estimated 100 billion dollars in frozen oil-sale assets; and would have all nuclear-related, multilateral sanctions on the country lifted (likely within a matter of months), along with the embargo on conventional arms within five years and restrictions on Iranian missile-technology acquisition within eight years.

In critical respects, the agreement drew from the advice of nuclear experts who argued that various restrictions could work in tandem to foreclose Iranian options.[51] The negotiators thereby sought the monitoring of Iran's full fuel cycle—mining, uranium conversion, and centrifuge production, operation, and storage—to boost the probability of detecting illicit Iranian activities. Their goal was to lengthen the time Iran requires to accumulate the materials to construct a nuclear weapon. Thus, the P5+1 crafted the JCPOA framework and the July 2015 agreement that followed to give countries a *full-year's warning* before Iran could obtain a nuclear weapon. Presumably, a year gave the P5+1 time to bring Iran into compliance with the agreement through assorted threats and sanctions or to disable or destroy its nuclear infrastructure by force, should Iran race for a bomb. Secretary of State John Kerry testified before the US Senate that increasing US warning time by six to twelve months was "significantly more" than the current window.[52] Whether Kerry is right or wrong obviously depends on whether these controls

give the United States and its allies additional warning time; breakout time is only "a useful proxy for the obstacles a deal might create for an Iranian sprint to the bomb."[53] But it also depends on whether any additional time improves the US position *significantly* to counter Iranian transgressions. Accordingly, answers to two basic questions informed all readings of the agreement.

First, will Iran simply wait out the agreement expecting that it could acquire a nuclear arsenal in short order once the agreement has expired? A reasoned response requires that analysts assess both Iran's current and future commitment to obtaining a nuclear weapon and, given an affirmative commitment, Iran's willingness to postpone acquisition to some point in the future. In making the required judgments, analysts must consider Iran's openness to the beliefs of hard-liners versus reformers, domestic and strategic conditions that press for and against acquisition in the near and long term, willingness to concede the country's nuclear ambitions to obtain resources to pursue other military or subversive political goals, and acceptance of the risks of conducting research and constructing facilities in secret. Definitive judgments in these regards are elusive, of course, which left policy makers and skilled analysts alike to rely on rather general assumptions about Iran's objectives.

Proponents of the agreement maintain, then, that a 15-year sunset provision provides considerable room for Western cooperation with Iran to grow and that the risks to Iran from endangering the agreement override any temptation to cheat. In this view, Iran had made the costly commitment of conceding the country's nuclear prerogatives by agreeing to very stringent terms that would essentially cut off all pathways to a bomb for a full decade and a half. During that period, Iran might reform under pressure from a growing middle class (strengthened by economic growth), acquire good cooperative habits, and receive ever-greater economic and political incentives, through ongoing relationships, to build bridges to the West.

In turn, the agreement's critics fear that Iran made short-term concessions to realize the country's long-term goal of acquiring a nuclear weapon. That is, Iran might prepare, through ongoing research, development, and accumulation of wealth, to rush for a bomb as the agreement expires. After 15 years, Iran would be free to increase and expand its nuclear enrichment capabilities without restriction. Under the deal, Iran's program "will be treated in the same manner as that of any other

non-nuclear-weapon state party to the NPT," as stated in the Agreement's Preamble and General Provisions.[54] Critics asked why a stronger Iran (now, a "nuclear threshold state") would presumably be a more compliant Iran.

The second question informing all readings of the agreement is will Iran violate the terms of the deal? In other words, will Iran incur the costs of a breakout from the agreement with a transparent push for a bomb, or seek, alternatively, to minimize the risk of premature exposure by conducting necessary research, developing relevant technologies, and enriching uranium in secret facilities? A reasoned response requires analysts to judge Iran's risk propensities under the agreement, again by considering Iran's goals.

Proponents conclude, accordingly, that Iran is unlikely to test the will of Western countries by engaging in prohibited nuclear activities when the chances of detection are high. Iran carries the burden of providing access and information to allay Western suspicions, and any one party to the agreement can take its concerns to the UN Security Council where a consensus is required to *block* the automatic reimposition of sanctions within a matter of weeks. Knowledgeable proponents argue further that the possession of a significant quantity of fissile material is but a single step toward a survivable nuclear arsenal. Thus, by violating the nuclear deal, Iran invites potentially high political and economic costs without compensatory gains in security. Proponents maintain, then, that a cautious Iran will concede its nuclear prerogatives to come out from under the threat of sanctions or military attack.

In contrast, US policy hawks oppose any agreement that provides less-than-complete transparency and allows Iran latitude to pursue its nuclear ambitions. If Iran's technological knowledge and capabilities can improve over time, *increasing* vigilance is also necessary—backed by a credible threat to impose costs on Iran for any lack of transparency. Critics worry, in fact, that Iran will repeatedly block inspections by insisting that "credible evidence" of violations is lacking or delay access to suspect sites for a number of weeks (in the name of "managed access") to hide incriminating evidence.[55] Through obstruction and deceit, Iran will position itself to pursue a bomb before the agreement has expired. The opportunity to do so actually increases at the mid- to far-end of the agreement's lifespan, as the time that Iran needs to acquire the nuclear material to build a bomb collapses under the terms of the deal.

Iran might bet, then, that it can eventually violate the agreement without cost due to favorable political conditions. Foreign leaders will remember the arduous negotiations that led to the July 2015 agreement and seek not to reopen old debates, fearing that Iran will renounce all constraints on its nuclear program (the *nuclear* "snapback" option). Experts will disagree over whether the incriminating evidence is convincing, Iran's actions reflect "legitimate" alternative interpretations of the agreement, or the potential developments bring Iran meaningfully closer to a bomb.[56] Military and intelligence officials will maintain that a US attack on the Iranian nuclear infrastructure can only damage known facilities and setback—not stop—an Iranian nuclear program. US allies will argue that a significant quantity of nuclear material is different from a weapon in hand. Regional experts will urge caution, warning that attacking Iranian facilities will provoke a regional (maybe global) conflict and will weaken the position of Iranian moderates who could impede Iran's march toward a bomb. Finally, commentators throughout the world will proffer that countries that acquire nuclear weapons can still be deterred and have strong reasons to act responsibly.

Iran could benefit further if it had planned a breakout from an agreement to catch foreign opponents flatfooted, that is, when sanctions have ended, the counterproliferation coalition has splintered or eroded, and the military option has lost viability with the hiding, hardening, or dispersion of Iranian nuclear assets. The risks to Iran at that point are potentially small. Iran might sprint toward the finish line expecting countries to accept one more nuclear-armed state, as they had a nuclear-armed North Korea. In time, the United States and its allies might well accommodate the "new reality" rather than sacrifice trade and investment opportunities or accept the risks of forcefully resolving the dispute. Iran has reason to expect a favorable resolution. By pursuing a one-year window to respond to Iran's violations, the United States implicitly conveys its own uncertainty about its willingness to act and ability to build a supportive international coalition. After all, the United States does not require a full year to pre-position US forces in the region to attack known Iranian nuclear facilities and requires considerably more time for new sanctions to work.

Supporters of the July 2015 agreement insist, however, that intentions are beside the point. They are arguably correct if any agreement with Iran is the *best* that the P5+1 could achieve under the circumstances and

better for the P5+1 than no agreement. Therefore, they maintain that, with an agreement, controls and checks on the Iranian nuclear program will increase. Indeed, the US capability to damage the Iranian nuclear infrastructure will only improve under the agreement with the information that is obtained from monitoring critical sites, the reduced size of the Iranian program, and the program's concentration in a smaller number of facilities.[57] They further maintain that, without an agreement, the sanctioning regime will fracture, the transparency of the Iranian nuclear program will dramatically decline, and the military option will remain as the sole—bad—alternative. These very conditions, according to President Obama, left the US Congress with no viable reasons to oppose the agreement.

Supporters and opponents undoubtedly say what they must to sell or to kill the deal. One prominent opponent, former ambassador Eric Edelman, noted accurately that the Obama administration once deflected criticism with the mantra, "a bad deal was worse than no deal," yet defended the final agreement by suggesting that "this deal, whatever its flaws is better than no deal and the only alternative is war."[58] Others argued that, should Iran violate the deal, UN sanctions will fully snap back into place, while insisting nonetheless that states will ignore these same sanctions should the United States reject the agreement.[59] In turn, critics who once insisted that "sanctions would not work" now championed the retention of sanctions to get a "better deal." They also challenged the agreement by implying that the alternative was a better deal, not—perhaps—*no* deal, which could leave the world without a window on the Iranian program or control over its direction.

Salesmanship aside, even reasoned judgments about whether the agreement is the best "that we can do" derive in no small part from assessments of Iranian intent. Supporters must consider what Iran will ultimately concede to get a deal, whether Iran will abide by the terms of the agreement or violate it brazenly or artfully to thwart the reimposition of sanctions or a preventative military strike, how Iran will respond to the renunciation of the agreement or a military strike, and whether Iran will build the infrastructure to rush for a bomb from a stronger strategic position at the far-end of the agreement. In point of fact, US policy makers have grounds to reject the JCPOA if concluding that Iran will effectively violate the deal at some moment of strategic advantage and that the agreement could breed complacency, an overriding commitment to

making the deal "work," or a desire to avoid confrontation at all costs by those who are charged with holding Iran accountable. To avoid that trap, the United States could renounce the agreement, press for further concessions, exert economic pressure on Iran, and try—through various means—to impede its nuclear progress. Should the United States stand alone, its disruptive influence and potential might give US allies and the business community pause in their dealings with Iran and provide Iran reason to placate the foreign opposition by holding, at some level, to the terms of the agreement.

The implications of these various arguments are simple—and perhaps disconcerting. Like it or not, the agreement comes with risk, and the risk grows or recedes with assumptions about Iranian goals. Obviously, stringent constraints on Iranian nuclear prerogatives are preferable to lax constraints. Tighter constraints can only increase the risks to Iran should it try to violate the terms of the agreement. But support for a nuclear deal within US policy circles is far more sensitive to assumptions about the intentions of Iran than to its opportunities to reap gains, illicit or otherwise, from the agreement. Assumptions about these goals, as shaped and charged for political effect, will determine whether an agreement's presumed benefits are worth the costs.

Critics have certainly tried to scuttle the agreement by focusing on its laxities. They suggest, for example, that Iran will exploit any openings to advantage, that these openings constitute prima facie evidence of Iran's bad faith in the negotiations, and that Iran's prior compliance with agreements surely indicates that negotiations work to Iran's favor. Focused thusly, critics make two incompatible assumptions about Iranian objectives. When challenging the agreement's safeguards, critics assume that Iran will pursue nuclear weapons with urgency; it will secretly or blatantly cheat on the agreement because these weapons serve the country's coercive or destructive goals. Conversely, when excoriating the agreement's effective expiration date, critics suggest that Iran will postpone nuclear-weapon acquisition to some point in the future. By then, the sanctions regime will have eroded, Iran's economy will have improved, Iran's nuclear infrastructure will have matured (as it introduces new centrifuge models and reaps benefits from permissible research and development), and the onerous constraints of the agreement will have loosened. Taken together, these assumptions present a logical conundrum.[60] An Iran that is plotting to acquire nuclear weapons in

secret will act with haste and take high risks and presumably seek one or more nuclear weapons for their inherent game-changing potential. An Iran that is plotting a long-term nuclear challenge to Western interests is presumably postponing—maybe, compromising—its nuclear aspirations in deference to cost. At the very least, such an Iran seems unlikely to exploit all potential avenues to acquire a bomb, let alone use it to harm the United States, Israel, or any other country simply *because it can*. Rather than refining their positions, however, critics resort to grand assumptions. For instance, an open letter to Congress from 200 retired US general and admirals recounts the litany of short- and long-term failures of the nuclear deal and concludes, with insufficient support, that the "agreement will enable Iran to become far more dangerous, render the Mideast still more unstable and introduce new threats to American interests as well as our allies."[61]

In making their case, supporters of the agreement construct a wobbly edifice of their own. In emphasizing the challenges confronting Iran should it secretly pursue a bomb, they focus on near-term treaty safeguards that permit a one-year warning period. Supporters thereby answer critics who argue that Iran will relentlessly pursue its nuclear objectives through all available means. They do so, however, only by deemphasizing long-term risk. Supporters note correctly that *some* safeguards will continue for two decades and beyond and that Iran committed to additional long-term monitoring of its nuclear program by agreeing to *seek* ratification of the NPT Additional Protocol under the agreement.[62] Still, negotiators would most definitely have rejected these more limited long-term restrictions had they been proposed as sole, near-term constraints on the Iranian program. What will have changed during the duration of the agreement to justify relaxing the restrictions? If the unprecedented short-term constraints are required because Iran might accept great risks and costs to acquire a bomb, does not that preclude weakening these constraints at the far-end of the agreement?

Supporters offer answers that beg for further development. Some advocates inside and outside the Obama administration pin their hopes for the coming years on Iran's willingness to reform and opt for cooperation with the West.[63] One nuclear-proliferation expert concluded, for example, that "the JCPOA provides a solid formula for blocking Iran's ability to build nuclear weapons for at least 15 years, and the time necessary to pursue and implement complementary initiatives to head

off the possibility that Iran will try to pursue an expansion of its nuclear program over the long-term."[64] But why should Iran's leaders moderate their goals as they become increasingly realizable? If they "have been on a superhighway, for the last 10 years, to create a nuclear weapon or a nuclear weapons program, with no speed limit," as former Secretary of State Colin Powell put it in praising the "remarkable" short-term restrictions of the agreement, why would they not just hit the gas when these restrictions are lifting?[65]

Elsewise, supporters focus on the safeguards entirely and suggest that Iran's goals are irrelevant. Indeed, three dozen former admirals and generals, who supported the Iran deal, signed an open letter to Congress that highlighted the deal's ability to block "the potential pathways to a nuclear bomb" and strictures for "intrusive verification" yet simply rejected insinuations, also without sufficient backing, that the agreement was "based on trust."[66] As a result, supporters downplay two plausible scenarios. Iran might seek to weaken US resolve and capability to confront Iranian transgressions, at home in its nuclear program and abroad by playing to widespread desires to preserve the nuclear arrangement or, instead, Iran might simply wait out the agreement and push for a bomb once the deal has expired. Thus, opponents and supporters have heatedly dueled over laxities and safeguards in the agreement. Despite the tenor and substance of the debate, both sides rely on their assumptions about what Iran will likely do in the near- and long-term future.

Final Thoughts

The Cold War ended, but its pattern of reasoning remains. Then as now, policy makers defended their agreements by arguing that they have everything to do with restrictions and verification and nothing to do with trust. But they actually have *everything* to do with trust when understood to mean that another, from a reading of its intent, will not act as it is capable.[67] Even those who believe the agreement controversy is an unnecessary distraction—that deterrence would ultimately stop a nuclear-armed Iran from achieving aggressive goals—*trust* that Iran will not willingly accept the costs of aggression.

Of course, intentions provide a deficient basis for national-security policy making. Intentions are opaque and variable, as many realists are quick to note. Realists are wrong, however, when they insist that the vi-

able alternative to considering intentions is to ignore them and to rely, instead, on the worst-case assumption that others act as they are capable. Mutual agreement is impossible under these conditions—for no agreement is ironclad or exempt from interpretation. The critical issue is whether laxities *or* safeguards matter given a party's incentives to exploit or adhere to the terms of the agreement. SSQ

Notes

1. A draft of this article was presented at the annual joint conference of the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association and the International Security and Arms Control Section of the American Political Science Association, November 2014, Austin, Texas. I wish to thank the panel participants as well as Caitlin Talmadge, Jacques Hymans, Matthew Gratias, and the *Strategic Studies Quarterly* editor, Mike Guillot, and reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions.

2. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

3. Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (October 1997): 171–201.

4. These signals include some level of demobilization or disarmament, designing forces for territorial defense, and preparing only to punish not to defeat aggressors. In this sense, this article accepts Glaser's own characterization of defensive realist arguments in recognizing that assumptions about motives are influenced by information of diverse origins. See Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2010).

5. This article does accept two key premises of the realist security dilemma. First, the capabilities of other states inform assessment of threat, and second, the "offensive" actions are not clearly apparent as such. On the importance of intentions to threat assessment, see Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987). On beliefs and behavior, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 119–61; and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "In the Eye of the Beholder: How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries," *International Security* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 7–51.

6. For a detailed discussion of these deficiencies, see James H. Lebovic, *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

7. On the challenges of inferring Soviet motives, see Richard K. Herrmann, *Perceptions and Behavior in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1985).

8. Albert Wohlstetter, "Is There a Strategic Arms Race?" *Foreign Policy* 15 (Summer 1974): 3–20 and "Is There a Strategic Arms Race? (II): Rivals but No 'Race,'" *Foreign Policy* 16 (Autumn 1974): 48–92.

9. Richard Pipes, "Militarism and the Soviet State," *Daedalus* 109, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 1–12.

10. Both conclusions became mainstays of US National Intelligence Estimates of Soviet strategic capabilities until the Cold War's end. On the exaggeration of the Soviet threat, see Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 89–136.

11. Colin S. Gray and Keith Payne, "Victory Is Possible," *Foreign Policy* 39 (Summer 1980): 14–27.

12. Bombers and submarine-launched ballistic missiles were reputedly not up to the task throughout much of the Cold War.

13. They thus defied dovish claims that the Soviets had only to provide the United States with *necessary* data for verifying Soviet treaty compliance under the terms of the SALT II Treaty and that the Soviets themselves lacked unfettered access to US telemetry, which the US military was loath to provide.

14. Suspect actions involved the construction of a phased-array radar facility that was not located on the Soviet border facing outward and the use of radar at Soviet missile test facilities simultaneous with tests of antiballistic missiles.

15. On the compliance disputes, see James A. Schear, "Arms Control Treaty Compliance: Buildup to a Breakdown," *International Security* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 141–82.

16. Amrom H. Katz, *Verification and SALT: The State of the Art and the Art of the State* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 1979).

17. Likewise, US policy analysts focused on operational issues, including the relative levels of damage incurred in one scenario or another, the launch options for safeguarding US counterforce capabilities, the soft- versus hard-target capabilities of bombers and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), and the mechanics of signaling (resolve and restraint) in the course of nuclear conflict.

18. Any such limitations would seem improbable once dual-nature civilian-military targets, including the Soviet leadership and government, had been struck; millions of Soviet citizens had been killed; Soviet command, control, communications, and intelligence networks had disintegrated; and Soviet leaders were now disinclined to believe the "best" of US intentions and inclined to guard against the "worst." For an excellent critique of Cold War–era, US nuclear strategy, see Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

19. Various alternative doctrinal standards vied with Assured Destruction but came no closer to settling whether and when US security was endangered by failing to offset Soviet nuclear "advantages." The Nixon administration professed to have an answer when it sought to scale US forces to meet two interrelated standards. The first of these was *sufficiency*, which meant that, under the worst of circumstances, the United States would retain retaliatory capability in amounts that could deter the Soviets from initiating an attack. The second of these concepts was *essential equivalence*, which meant that the United States need not match Soviet weapons in numbers and varieties as long as the United States was not left with aggregate inferiority. Despite misgivings about Assured Destruction (AD) principles, the administration had not proposed a useful substitute that could guide US arms-control positions. The question of how much *relative* capability was enough for sufficiency was a difficult variant of its absolute (AD) counterpart. US policy makers were left no closer, then, to establishing definitively whether US security was secure or threatened at current US–Soviet force levels.

20. The Soviets retained a hypothetical capability under the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty to destroy the US land-based force in a first strike. The agreement permitted Soviet land-based, MIRVed missiles—including heavy SS-18 missiles with their vast multiple-war

head potential—in ratios to US land-based missiles that officials in the Reagan administration once found threatening.

21. The academic literature tends to focus instead on prerequisites for nuclear self-sufficiency. For that purpose, it relies on proxies for essential program requirements, opting for measures that are easily monitored using available data. See Dong-Joon Jo and Erik Gartzke, "Determinants of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 1 (February 2007): 167–94; and Stephen M. Meyer, *The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For a good critique, see Scott D. Sagan, "Nuclear Latency and Nuclear Proliferation," in *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century,* vol. 1: *The Role of Theory*, ed. William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

22. Jacques E. C. Hymans, "When Does a State Become a 'Nuclear Weapons State'?: An Exercise in Measurement Validation," in *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century,* vol. 1: *The Role of Theory*, ed. William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

23. Jacques E. C. Hymans and Matthew Gratias, "Iran and the Nuclear Threshold: Where Is the Line?" *Nonproliferation Review* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13–38.

24. For insights on this position, see Hymans, "When Does a State Become."

25. Admittedly, *none* of the responses above to the testing standard are easily dismissed, for each could carry weight under the right circumstances. After all, Israel *did* acquire nuclear weapons without testing; and even crude, cumbersome nuclear devices are potentially deliverable and useful for *some* purposes.

26. Indeed, using a bomb's worth of 20-percent enriched uranium as a standard presumes that Iran would rush for a *single* bomb and would do so without knowing how much of that uranium it would actually need for a device—lacking relevant experience in uranium processing. On this, see Dan Williams, "Analysis: Obama Won't Trip over Netanyahu's Iran 'Red Line,'" *Reuters*, 15 March 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/15/ususaisraelobamairanidUSBRE92E06Q20130315.

27. Full participation requires adherence to the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreements for verifying the accuracy of country reporting and the Additional Protocols for verifying the completeness of reporting—the latter, by granting the IAEA access to undeclared sites to conduct inspections and sampling and by providing the agency with requested documentation. On the Protocols, see Mark Hibbs, "The Unspectacular Future of the IAEA Additional Protocol. Proliferation Analysis," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (web site), 26 April 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/26/unspectacularfutureofiaeaadditionalprotocol.

28. Proximity and capabilities alone can explain Israel's 1981 attack on Iraq's Osirak reactor and 2007 attack on a suspected Syrian nuclear reactor.

29. In this, the administration was arguably responding to Israel's manipulation of US domestic politics. Israel's incentive was to use all available political leverage, including public pressure upon the administration (before the close 2012 US presidential election) and a threat of immediate, unilateral military action, to get the United States to attack Iran—and, falling short, to get the United States to commit to attack after Israel's unilateral window of military opportunity had closed. Essentially, Israel tried to solve a "commitment problem" by getting the Obama administration to announce publicly—and, therefore, presumably irrevocably—to strike Iranian nuclear facilities when the United States sought instead to keep its options open. Having staked a public position, the administration presumably could not easily back down with subsequent evidence that Iran's nuclear program had progressed. On "audience

costs," see James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 577–92.

30. Harald Müller and Andreas Schmidt, "The Little-Known Story of Deproliferation: Why States Give Up Nuclear Weapons Activities" in *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century,* vol. 1: *The Role of Theory*, ed. William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 132. The extent of these activities in a country can remain unknown even to its leaders so that their words and behavior are potentially misleading. Saddam Hussein was constantly misinformed about the actual state of Iraqi capabilities by subordinates who feared for their personal safety. See Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and Williamson Murray, "Saddam's Delusions: The View from the Inside," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 3 (May–June 2006): 2–26.

31. Matthew Kroenig, *A Time to Attack: The Looming Iranian Nuclear Threat* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 34–37. In consequence, Iran's nuclear progress would remain open to dispute. When Iran announced to UN officials in January 2013 that it would install advanced (IR-2M) centrifuges at the Natanz installation, increasing the speed with which the country could acquire material for a bomb, outside analysts could still find reason for optimism: Iran would have difficulty under sanctions acquiring materials to construct these centrifuges, had slowed the growth of its uranium stockpile, and had not announced plans to introduce the centrifuges at the less-vulnerable Fordow facility, near the city of Qom. Likewise, with the disclosure of Iran's efforts in late 2011 to procure from China 100,000 ring-shaped magnets, which could support a quintupling of (IR-1) centrifuge numbers, observers still had reason to believe that Iran was not any closer to acquiring a weapon. Iran converted some uranium into metallic form and kept its holdings of medium-enriched uranium below levels that were necessary to construct a bomb. Joby Warrick, "Iran to Enrich More Uranium," *Washington Post*, 1 February 2013, A8; and "Iran Sought Banned Magnets," *Washington Post*, 14 February 2013, A1.

32. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; and Robert Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," *International Security* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1982/83): 3–30.

33. On this point, it must be said that many dozens of states have refused to accept the NPT Additional Protocols to avoid burdensome reporting and administrative requirements and protest the failure of nuclear-weapon states to disarm.

34. On decisional maladies, see Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception;" and Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1989). Put differently, the problem for a coercing party is that its compellence demands increase a target's deterrence concerns. See Richard N. Lebow and Janice G. Stein, "Deterrence: The Elusive Dependent Variable," *World Politics* 42, no. 3 (April 1990): 353–56.

35. The key judgments of the estimate are available at National Security Archive: National Intelligence Council, *Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington, DC: National Foreign Intelligence Board, 2002), http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB80/wmd15.pdf.

36. It reached this conclusion despite the conclusion by the International Atomic Energy Commission, based on its inspections through 1999, that there was "no indication that Iraq possesses nuclear weapons or any meaningful amounts of weapon-usable nuclear material, or that Iraq has retained any practical capability (facilities or hardware) for the production of such material." The skepticism was backed by the US Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, which indicated that the evidence was "inadequate" to conclude that Iraq is pursuing an "integrated and comprehensive approach to acquire nuclear weapons." See

Jeffrey T. Richelson, *Spying on the Bomb: American Nuclear Intelligence from Nazi Germany to Iran and North Korea* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 485.

37. Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 137–84; and Paul R. Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

38. Once the assumption that Iraq had these weapons took hold, the bias among intelligence organizations was toward reinforcement over change. The obvious question was, "Why wouldn't Iraq come clean, now, if it had nothing to hide?" That Iraq acted furtively—and had previously deceived the outside world—colored all assessments of Iraqi behavior. As a result, exculpatory evidence was mistaken for subterfuge; the lack of evidence was treated as confirmatory evidence; implicating evidence was viewed as more compelling than a lack of information where it should have been found; and alternative explanations for the evidence were ignored or discounted when the evidence also confirmed preferred explanations. See Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, "Chapter 1 Case Study: Iraq," in *Report to the President of the United States* (Washington, DC: Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, 31 March 2005), https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/wmd_report.pdf; and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq* (Washington, DC: Senate, July 2004), 7, http://fas.org/irp/congress/2004_rpt/ssci_iraq.pdf. For an excellent summary and analysis, see Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

39. Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, "Obama Rebuffs Netanyahu on Setting Limits on Iran's Nuclear Program," *New York Times*, 14 September 2012, A7.

40. Robert Jervis, "Getting to Yes with Iran: The Challenges of Coercive Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January–February 2013), 110.

41. On this so-called commitment trap, see Scott D. Sagan, "The Commitment Trap: Why the United States Should Not Use Nuclear Threats to Deter Biological and Chemical Weapons Attacks," *International Security* 24, no. 4 (Spring 2000): 85–115.

42. That question will remain should one or more countries attack Iran's nuclear facilities in the near or long term. After an attack, Iran might still retain parts of its nuclear infrastructure, close its facilities entirely to inspection, and commit fully to building a bomb to guard against future attacks.

43. For the pros and cons on attacking Iran, see, respectively, Matthew Kroenig, "Time to Attack Iran: Why a Strike is the Least Bad Option," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 1 (January–February 2012): 76–86; and Colin H. Kahl, "Not Time to Attack Iran: Why War Should Be a Last Resort," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (March–April 2012): 166–73.

44. For a summary of the proposals and counterproposals, see Arms Control Association, "History of Official Proposals on the Iranian Nuclear Issue," January 2014, http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposals.

45. Increasingly, the negotiations "lost comprehensiveness" as Western negotiators tried to carve out areas of agreement to facilitate trust building, dropped preconditions for negotiations (for example, the suspension of Iranian nuclear activities), focused on pressing issues (such as Iran's decision to enrich uranium to 20 percent, ostensibly for its research reactor), or sought to curtail at least *portions* of the Iranian nuclear program.

46. See, for example, International Crisis Group, "Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube," *Middle East Report*, no. 152, 9 May 2014, 17–19, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Iran/152-iran-and-the-p5-plus-1-solving-the-nuclear-rubiks-cube.pdf.

47. Under the July 2015 agreement that followed, the issue was left to the IAEA to resolve. In December 2015 the IAEA issued its report, concluding that Iran had previously engaged in nuclear-weapons research. Iran's interlocutors expressed a desire to move forward nonetheless, rather than dwell on Iran's prior activities; critics charged that failing to hold Iran accountable would create monitoring blind spots and sacrifice reference points for judging Iran's full compliance with the agreement.

48. Carol Morello and Karen DeYoung, "In Iran Nuclear Talks, Near-Collapse before Breakthrough," *Washington Post*, 8 April 2015, A6.

49. Michael Gordon, "Outline of Iran Nuclear Deal Sounds Different from Each Side," *New York Times*, 4 April 2014.

50. Unfortunately for outside observers, the implicating and the exculpatory evidence were fundamentally inconclusive: leaders sometimes feign intransigence to appease domestic supporters, deflect challenges from the opposition, or reap benefits in the negotiations by alluding to the constraints that the internal squabbling imposes on their negotiating flexibility. See Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 427–60. In struggling to decipher mixed messages, Western diplomats had to decide whether to tread softly so as not to taint, embarrass, or provoke the accommodative faction.

51. For instance, see David Albright, Olli Heinonen, and Andrea Stricker, "Five Compromises to Avoid in a Comprehensive Agreement with Iran," *Institute for Science and International Security Report*, 3 June 2014, http://www.isisonline.org/uploads/isisreports/documents/Five_Bad_Compromises_3June2014final.pdf; and Institute for Science and International Security, "Defining Iranian Nuclear Programs in a Comprehensive Solution under the Joint Plan of Action," *Institute for Science and International Security Report*, 15 January 2014, http://www.isisonline.org/uploads/isisreports/documents/Elements_of_a_Comprehensive_Solution_20Jan2014_1.pdf.

52. David Ignatius, "Closer, but Still No Deal on Iran," *Washington Post*, 23 April 2014, A15.

53. Charles S. Robb and Charles F. Wald, *Evaluating a Nuclear Deal with Iran* (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2014), 30, http://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/BPC%20Evaluating%20an%20Iran%20Nuclear%20Deal.pdf.

54. Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Vienna, Austria,14 July 2015, https://medium.com/the-iran-deal/joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action-5cdd9b320fd#2c99.

55. How successfully Iran could hide evidence given satellite surveillance and residual radioactivity remained in dispute. For an excellent discussion of these issues, see Gary Samore, ed., *The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (BCSIA), August 2015), 38–39. http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/25599/iran_nuclear_deal.html.

56. Jacques E. C. Hymans, "The Threat of Nuclear Proliferation: Perception and Reality," *Ethics and International Affairs* 27, no. 3 (2013): 281–98.

57. On this, see Austin Long, "If You Really Want to Bomb Iraq Take the Deal," *Monkey Cage* (blog), *Washington Times* (web site), 3 April 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/04/03/if-you-really-want-to-bomb-iran-take-the-deal.

58. Quoted in Jennifer Rubin, "Voting 'No' Is the Way to Prevent War," *Right Turn* (blog), *Washington Post* (web site), 15 July 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2015/07/15/voting-no-is-the-way-to-prevent-war/.

59. See, for instance, Fareed Zakaria, "Sen. Shumer's Illogical Case against the Iran Deal," *Washington Post*, 13 August 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dear

-sen-schumer-dont-vote-against-the-iran-nuclear-deal/2015/08/13/7b806630-41f4-11e5-846d-02792f854297_story.html.

60. To be sure, some critics have focused their skepticism on the far end of the agreement in conceding that "the deal would block the uranium enrichment, plutonium separation and covert paths to a nuclear bomb for the next 15 years." Dennis Ross and David H. Petraeus, "The Bit in the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Washington Post*, 26 August 2015, A19.

61. Carol Morello, "Retired Generals and Admirals Urge Congress to Reject Iran Nuclear Deal," *Washington Post*, 26 August 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/retired-generals-and-admirals-urge-congress-to-reject-iran-deal/2015/08/26/8912d9c6-4bf5-11e5-84df-923b3ef1a64b_story.html.

62. See, for example, Kelsey Davenport, "Reflections on Iran's Nuclear Program: Beyond 15 Years," *Arms Control Today* 7, no. 9 (25 August 2015): https://www.armscontrol.org/Issue-Briefs/2015-08-25/Restrictions-on-Irans-Nuclear-Program-Beyond-15-Years.

63. For political reasons, supporters reluctantly acknowledge their reliance on such optimism. Gardiner Harris, "Deeper Mideast Aspirations Seen in Nuclear Deal with Iran," *New York Times*, 31 July 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/world/middleeast/deeper-mideast-aspirations-seen-in-nuclear-deal-with-iran.html.

64. See Kelsey Davenport, "Iran Dismantling Centrifuges, IAEA Says," Arms Control Association (web site), December 2015, http://www.armscontrol.org/taxonomy/term/153.

65. Alexandra Jaffe, "Colin Powell: Iran Deal Is a 'Pretty Good Deal,'" *NBC News*, 6 September 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iran-nuclear-talks/colin-powell-iran-deal-pretty-good-deal-n422551.

66. "36 Retired U.S. Generals and Admirals Announce Support of Iran Deal," *Haaretz* (Israel), 12 August 2015, http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/1.670756.

67. Aaron M. Hoffman, *Building Trust: Overcoming Suspicion in International Conflict* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

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