
Balancing for (In)Security: An Analysis of the Iranian Nuclear Crisis in the Light of the Cuban Missile Crisis¹

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Abstract

Israel and the US are currently balancing against Iran because both perceive a nuclear-armed Iran as a threat to regional and world security. But does balancing really work? Does it reduce threat and provide security? I will use Stephan M. Walt's "Balance of Threat" theory to address these questions. In addition to Walt's theory, I assume that perceiving a state's intention(s) as aggressive is decisive for that state being (perceived as) a threat. I hypothesise that balancing fails and likely backfires in that it exacerbates the security dilemma and reinforces the threat perceived by the balancing states (Israel and the US). The use of balancing strategies in the current Iranian nuclear crisis would be futile and, if anything, would only strengthen the belief in Tehran that Iranian nuclear weapons are a necessary means of deterrence and self-defence.

Key Words

Cuban missile crisis, "balance of threat"-theory, balancing, perception and misperception, Iranian nuclear crisis, Stephen M. Walt.

The US, Israel and Iran: Balancing the Threat

Israel and the US are currently balancing against Iran because both perceive a nuclear-armed Iran as threatening to regional and world security. As US President Barack Obama stated in 2011: "We are not taking any options off the table. Iran with nuclear weapons would pose a threat not only to the region but also to the United States."² As repeated, and even enhanced, by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a UN General Assembly session in September 2012 (and illustrated with a cartoon-like bomb): "[J]ust imagine Iranian aggression with nuclear weapons.... Who among you would feel safe in the Middle East? Who would be safe in Europe? Who would be safe in America? Who would be safe anywhere?"³ From the Iranian perspective a military strike against it must at least appear quite likely.⁴

I consider Stephan M. Walt's "Balance of Threat" theory⁵ to be a convincing theory for explaining state behaviour as I agree that states react to threats, not to power. In line with the "Balance of

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Threat” theory, I define balancing as a countervailing state strategy⁶ designed to counter a perceived external threat through military or non-military means⁷ that are internal or external in direction,⁸ and that aim to reduce the threat and pursue security.⁹ This understanding is open to a wide range of potential state reactions: military build-up as well as the forming of alliances, economic sanctions or diplomatic pressure. Although there is obviously some disagreement about the meaning of balancing, it is nevertheless possible to identify the central tenets nearly all balancing conceptions rest on: balancing is a state behaviour,¹⁰ its purpose is to pursue security,¹¹ and its aim is “to counter an external threat”,¹² i.e., to shift the state’s relative power¹³ to its advantage compared to the threatening state’s power.¹⁴ Consequently, balancing is directed at a particular target, “the most threatening state or the most powerful state, that is, a potential threat or even a traditional rival”.¹⁵ Therefore, the purpose of balancing is to weaken a state or alliance perceived as a threat. Balancing can take on four different forms: it can be hard or soft balancing, and either can be pursued through a positive or negative approach.

The “Balance of Threat” theory thus opposes the core assumption of the “Balance of Power” theory, namely that states attempt to prevent a potential hegemon from arising by balancing against it.¹⁶ The latest and maybe most

striking example for the accuracy of Walt’s theory is the current Iranian nuclear crisis.¹⁷ Moreover, the crisis over Iran’s nuclear weapons programme¹⁸ is symptomatic of a conflicting security policy that aims to create greater security but has achieved the exact opposite. Why is this? The problem is as follows: The action that one state must take in order to increase its security will be perceived as a threat to the security of another state, which will then initiate the appropriate countermeasures. This will only increase the insecurity of the first state. In political science, this is known as a security dilemma, which was first described by John Herz: “A structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each *interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening*”.¹⁹

When speaking of power, the term should be understood to represent more than raw capabilities.

The Iranian crisis is posing such a security dilemma. Iran has felt threatened, perhaps even endangered, for some time. Tehran’s perceived adherence to its nuclear weapons programme can therefore be explained as a reaction

to this perceived threat. The solution to the crisis therefore depends on successfully changing Iran's perception. The perception and misperception of security and insecurity are crucial to understanding the crisis in Iran, and the Cuban Missile Crisis provides a convenient blueprint for analysing this. The focus on perception means that the following is not a question of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of political acts but of how these acts are perceived by Iran (as well as the US and Israel) and the consequences that these perceptions have on security.

My guiding assumptions are as follows:

- First, balancing aggravates the threat instead of reducing it as proven by the Cuban Missile Crisis; and
- Second, the perception of a state's intentions as aggressive is decisive in that state being (perceived as) a threat.

My hypothesis can therefore be formulated as follows: Given that balancing fails and likely backfires in that it exacerbates the security dilemma and reinforces the threat perceived by the balancing state(s), the use of balancing strategies would be counterproductive. Thus, for the current Iranian nuclear crisis, balancing against Iran would be futile. If anything, it would strengthen the belief in Tehran that Iranian nuclear weapons are a necessary means of deterrence and self-defence.

What Makes A State A Threat?

The US and Israel, two hegemonic powers with global or regional scope, see themselves threatened by the much weaker Iran when measured in terms of military capabilities and economic data, which Walt refers to as "aggregate power".²⁰ That leads us to question what makes a state a threat. Walt distinguishes four different sources of threats:²¹

- Aggregate power refers to "a state's total resources",²² the greater the aggregate power, the greater the threat a state can pose.
- Geographic proximity refers to distance that lies between the potential competitors; the greater the distance, the more limited "the ability to project power",²³ and the more limited the potential threat.
- Offensive power refers to the size of "offensive capabilities";²⁴ the greater the offensive power, the greater the threat a state can pose. Offensive power is closely related to both aggregate power and geographic proximity.
- Aggressive intentions refer to how states perceive a potential foe.²⁵

I assume that aggregate power, geographic proximity, and offensive power are not decisive for constituting a threat.²⁶ Along these lines, "[T]here is not much that nuclear weapons can do

that cannot be done with an ice pick”.²⁷ It is not the weapons available but rather the resolve that constitutes a threat:

With a combination of bombing and blockade, eventually invasion, and if necessary the deliberate spread of disease, the United States could probably have exterminated the population of the Japanese islands without nuclear weapons. It would have been a gruesome, expensive, and mortifying campaign....²⁸

During the Cold War, for example, the nuclear weapons of the US, the UK and France were not threatening to Germany; notwithstanding the tremendous supremacy of the US in terms of aggregate and offensive power. Given the vast number of intercontinental ballistic missiles, the remoteness between the US and Germany is inconsequential. The image that Germany had/has of the US (as well as the UK and France) was, and still is, decisive: The US is neither perceived as aggressive nor as hostile. Therefore they are not and were not a threat to Germany.

Thazha V. Paul provides an analogous example with regard to the Kosovo War that was led by NATO and headed by the US. Although Russia and China practiced extensive soft balancing behaviour²⁹ that should have culminated in a Russian-Chinese-Indian alliance, the alliance ultimately failed to materialise because “the principal powers began to perceive the likelihood of ‘potential American military intervention in their

internal wars of secession in Kashmir, Chechnya, and Xinjiang’ as extremely low”.³⁰ Despite the tremendous military power of the US, the perception of the US as non-threatening was crucial for Russian and China. Therefore, I assume that perceiving a state’s intentions as aggressive is a decisive factor in that state being (perceived as) a threat.

In the following pages, I provide an analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which fundamentally resembles the current Iranian nuclear crisis;³¹ in both crises, I find strong motivations for balancing against a perceived threat (the nuclear missiles on Cuba or nuclear weapons in Iran). For both crises, I describe the same vicious circle of perception and misperception that makes resolving the Iranian crisis as impossible as resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis, during which John F. Kennedy thought the likelihood of war to be “somewhere between one out of three and even”.³²

Balancing on the Brink of a Nuclear War

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, both Khrushchev and Kennedy tried to balance the opposing side. First, Nikita Khrushchev felt the need to protect Cuba from renewed US aggression; second, he wanted to reduce the feeling of strategic vulnerability; and third, he wanted to repay in kind. Taken together, these

reasons made stationing nuclear missiles in Cuba seem like the best available solution for Khrushchev. The US policy towards post-Batista Cuba and the Soviet Union can also be described as balancing.

Protecting Cuba

Since the successful revolution and expulsion of the dictator, Fulgencio Batista in January 1959, the regime of Fidel Castro had been confronted with a number of attempts by the US to change the system or, more precisely, to bring about a counter-revolution in Cuba. The first, on 17 April 1961, was an attempt by Cuban exiles with US support to overthrow Castro. The invasion failed, however, and Kennedy was humiliated.³³ Between November 1961 and February 1963, the CIA, via numerous covert operations under “Operation Mongoose”, again tried and failed to destabilise the regime in Havana and kill Castro.³⁴ At the same time, the US held off a series of large-scale manoeuvres which- albeit poorly disguised- constituted preparations for a possible invasion of Cuba, something that Khrushchev feared. “I was haunted by the knowledge that the Americans could not stomach having Castro’s Cuba right next to them. They would do something. They had the strength, and they had the means”.³⁵

Considering that Cuba had both great strategic and emotional significance for

Khrushchev- the latter because Cuba had taken the path to socialism without interference from the Red Army; the former because of its proximity to North America- his reaction to the perceived immediate threat of the US was only rational. Andrei Gromyko, Soviet Foreign Minister from 1957 to 1985, recalls that for Khrushchev, there was a direct link to the threat to Cuba. He therefore decided to deploy nuclear missiles there: “[I]t is essential to deploy a certain number of our nuclear missiles there. This alone can save the country [Cuba]. Last year’s failed assault isn’t going to stop Washington”.³⁶

Strategic vulnerability

The Soviet Union launched *Sputnik 1*, the first artificial Earth satellite, on 4 October 1957. Given that it was visible worldwide and that its radio pulses were detectable, *Sputnik 1* simply reinforced that the USSR was as good as, if not superior to, the US. Sputnik haunted the US because Khrushchev made an honest effort to generate the feeling of Soviet superiority in the US after the successful Sputnik mission.³⁷ Concerns that the US could be inferior to the USSR became the dominant topic of the presidential campaign. Kennedy massively criticised President Dwight D. Eisenhower for being responsible for the so-called missile gap. Kennedy warned that the US might become “second in space- second in

missiles".³⁸ After his election, Kennedy initiated the biggest US military build-up during a time of peace.³⁹

However, the opposite was true: The US was indeed superior to the Soviet Union, both in terms of the number and technical maturity of nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles. This was not unknown to Khrushchev, who did not only see himself challenged in Cuba. He therefore reacted with a rhetorical show of force: At the height of the 1959 Berlin Crisis, Khrushchev forcefully warned Ambassador Averell Harriman against maintaining the US position in Berlin: "If you send in tanks, they will burn and make no mistake about it. If you want war, you can have it, but remember it will be your war. Our rockets will fly automatically".⁴⁰

In response to the increasingly bellicose rhetoric of Khrushchev (from the perspective of the US), which had caused near-catastrophe at Checkpoint Charlie in divided Berlin in October 1961, Kennedy allowed Deputy Secretary of Defence Roswell L. Gilpatric to publicly declare the military superiority of the US on 21 October 1961: "In short, we have a second strike capability which is at least as extensive as what the Soviets can deliver by striking first. Therefore, we are confident that the Soviets will not provoke a major nuclear conflict".⁴¹ While Kennedy saw the appeasement as a means of moderation, Khrushchev took it as an open threat. Gilpatric's

declaration made clear that the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal was no longer a credible deterrent for the US. For Khrushchev, the possibility of a US first strike must have seemed realistic- and the missiles in Cuba, a necessary means of self-defence.

Tit-for-tat

Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, which could have easily reached and destroyed Washington, were an unprecedented provocation from a US perspective. The missiles were not, however, unprecedented: the US had begun to install nuclear missiles in several NATO partner states in 1959. First, medium-range *Thor* missiles with a maximum range of 5,500 kilometres were stationed in the UK. Medium-range *Jupiter* missiles with a range of more than 2,000 kilometres were then stationed in Italy. In April 1961, *Jupiter* missiles were also stationed in Turkey. This decision of the Eisenhower administration was a direct response to the US fear of Soviet strategic superiority, which was provoked by the Sputnik. Therefore, for the US, these missiles were merely a defensive means of deterrence. Khrushchev, however, perceived them differently. For him, these missiles-especially the *Jupiter* missiles stationed in Turkey- were a threat. While they could have easily reached and destroyed the Soviet capital, the *Jupiter* missiles were extremely vulnerable; even

with conventional weapons they would not have survived a Soviet attack. The Soviet Union, however, considered them to be offensive weapons- even though they were solely meant to deter a possible Soviet attack on Europe and the US.⁴²

Why Perception Matters

The efforts of Khrushchev and Kennedy to balance against the threat both perceived in the opposing side led the world to the brink of a nuclear war:

At the time [of the Cuban Missile Crisis], John F. Kennedy estimated the likelihood of war to be “somewhere between one out of three and even”. Nikita Khrushchev was equally pessimistic. A week after the crisis, he told newsmen in Moscow that “we were on the edge of the precipice of nuclear war. Both sides were ready to go.”⁴³

Objectively speaking, nuclear weapons represent a massive threat. From the perspective of those at risk, there is indeed a difference between possessing nuclear missiles and/or deploying them on allied territory and an opponent doing the same. Khrushchev regarded the deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba as a means of defending the island against the threat of US invasion. Kennedy perceived this as an immediate threat to US security. He made it clear that the US would not tolerate missiles in Cuba under any circumstances:

But this secret, swift, and extraordinary buildup of Communist- in an area well known to have a special and historical

relationship to the United States and the nations of the Western Hemisphere, in violation of Soviet assurances, and in defiance of American and hemispheric policy- this sudden, clandestine decision to station strategic weapons for the first time outside of Soviet soil- is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country if our courage and our commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe.⁴⁴

The ultimate deciding factor is how the relevant key players perceive and judge the intentions of the threatening state (or alliance), a perception which is strongly influenced (but not determined) by an image already formed.

The problem here was that any action taken by the US or the Soviet Union in order to increase security was perceived by the other as a reinforcement of the perceived threat, which only caused more rigorous countermeasures and made the security situation for both sides even more precarious. This mutually reinforcing process is highly dependent on the perceived intentions of the potential adversary. As Robert Jervis states: “The decision maker who thinks that the other side is probably hostile will see ambiguous information as confirming this image, whereas the same

information about a country thought to be friendly would be taken more benignly.”⁴⁵ In other words, the same information can lead to quite different assessments and evaluations.

Self-perception and external perception may also fundamentally differ, as former US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles stated: “Khrushchev does not need to be convinced of our good intentions. He knows we are not aggressors and do not threaten the security of the Soviet Union”.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the opposite was true: Khrushchev felt threatened by the US, which led to his decision to station nuclear missiles in Cuba.

Richards J. Heuer offers an explanation for this “perception problem”. He describes perception as “an active rather than a passive process; it constructs rather than records ‘reality’”.⁴⁷ This process, in which people construct their own version of reality, is “strongly influenced by their past experience, education, cultural values, and role requirements, as well as by the stimuli recorded by their receptor organs”.⁴⁸ As one fundamental principle of perception, Heuer suggests that “[w]

e tend to perceive what we expect to perceive”.⁴⁹ Therefore, with respect to policy against a perceived threat, it is irrelevant whether the state (or alliance) under suspicion really plans to attack the US (as the Kennedy administration falsely assumed during the Cuban Missile Crisis) or merely wished to satisfy a need for security.

The ultimate deciding factor is how the relevant key players perceive and judge the intentions of the threatening state (or alliance), a perception which is strongly influenced (but not determined) by an image already formed. The image of a state as aggressive and the perception of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing: The image influences

The concept of “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD), through which both superpowers were granted secure second-strike capability during the Cold War, is the highest expression of nuclear deterrence and no-deployment doctrine: Even a successful nuclear first strike cannot prevent a nuclear response with mutually disastrous consequences.

the perception, and the perception fosters the image. This dynamic process⁵⁰ I’ve illustrated and described in greater detail in my working-paper *Why Balancing Fails: Theoretical Reflections on Stephan M. Walt’s “Balance of Threat” Theory*.⁵¹ I believe that these reasons, although slightly modified, as well as this dynamic process can be found in the Iranian nuclear crisis.

Tehran's Desire for Nuclear Weapons

Why does Iran want to gain mastery of the complete nuclear fuel cycle? This would, of course, include the capacity to produce nuclear weapons of mass destruction (WMD) when Tehran deems it necessary. This is a legitimate question considering that the paradox of nuclear weapons hasn't changed since the end of the Cold War: "The only winning move is not to play!"⁵² They are needed in order to decrease the likelihood of their use. The concept of "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD), through which both superpowers were granted secure second-strike capability during the Cold War, is the highest expression of nuclear deterrence and no-deployment doctrine: Even a successful nuclear first strike cannot prevent a nuclear response with mutually disastrous consequences.

A first strike would be as self-destructive for Iran as it was for the US or the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Tehran would have to reckon with massive nuclear and conventional retaliation from both Israel and the US. From Iran's standpoint, a nuclear first strike would be highly irrational and should therefore be regarded as highly unlikely.⁵³

Nevertheless, Israel assumes that Iran's potential nuclear armament poses an existential threat. Tel Aviv perceives the potential nuclear weapons as offensive weapons and imputes equally offensive

intent to Iran.⁵⁴ "A nuclear Iran would pose a terrible threat on the Middle East and on the entire world. And of course, it poses a great, direct threat on us too", warned Israel's Premier Benjamin Netanyahu in October 2011 in a speech to the Knesset.⁵⁵ Netanyahu clearly summarised Israel's defence doctrine: "[I]f someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first".⁵⁶

From the perspective of a rational actor, adhering to the nuclear weapons programme makes little sense. One might assume that Iran is an irrational actor. Thereby, the Iranian quest for nuclear weapons, as irrational as it seems, would once again make sense. In fact, Iran is behaving as a soberly calculating, rational actor: "Iran behaves as a logical actor- even in Iranian terms- that considers the risks and costs incurred by its actions and is not guided by ideological-religious considerations alone..."⁵⁷ Thus, this situation resembles Khrushchev's decision to secretly deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba. From a contemporary perspective, this step appears irrational and highly risky. From Khrushchev's perspective, however, it was not completely irrational to expect the US to tolerate nuclear missiles (which could have easily reached Washington) in its own backyard. Khrushchev perceived the deployment of missiles to Cuba as a purely defensive measure, and as Cuban leader Fidel Castro recalls: "He was constantly talking about this, constantly

talking about peace, constantly talking about negotiations with the United States, trying to do away with the Cold War, with the arms race and so on".⁵⁸ In a letter addressed to Kennedy, Khrushchev defended his decision as a backlash to the nuclear missiles in Turkey: "Your missiles are located in Turkey. You are disturbed over Cuba. You say that this disturbs you because it is 90 miles by sea from the coast of the United States of America. But Turkey adjoins us..."⁵⁹

The same applies to Iran's adherence to the nuclear programme despite massive, long-standing, and sustained international pressure. Here, we must try to understand why Tehran has apparently decided to resume its nuclear programme and military development. Fears of Iranian nuclear weapons usually have a common denominator: the assumed hostile intent toward Iran. Of course, the Iranian nuclear weapons plans can be perceived from an Israeli, American or European perspective. From Iran's perspective, the nuclear programme certainly appears as a rational means of self-defence, self-preservation (of the regime) and retribution (tit-for-tat).

Vulnerability

The fact that Iran so eagerly seeks possession of nuclear weapons is essentially the result of Western or, more precisely, US interventionist policy. Since the mid-20th century, the US has

first positioned itself as a stabiliser and supporter of the Shah and second as a supporter of Saddam Hussein and Iran's enemies. However, Iran has done little to promote constructive relations with the US following the Islamic Revolution. The 444-day-long hostage situation of 52 US diplomats and embassy staff in Tehran from 4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981 was only the first of many problematic events.⁶⁰

In 1953, the US actively participated in the overthrow of a popular prime minister and the restoration of the Shah,⁶¹ and this plays an especially large role in the collective memory of Iran. The first Gulf War should have decisive weight in setting the course for Iran's security and should profoundly and lastingly change the assessment of WMD.

The fall of the Shah in January 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran forced the US to seek a new ally in the Gulf region. To ensure their own hegemony, the US had relied on two partners: Saudi Arabia and the regime of the Shah of Iran. With the end of the Shah, Washington chose Iran's neighbour, Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor to US President Jimmy Carter, stated on television:

We see no fundamental incompatibility of interests between the United States and Iraq. We feel that Iraq desires to be independent, that Iraq wishes a secure Persian Gulf, and we do not feel that American-Iraq relations need to be

frozen in antagonism... we do not wish to continue the anomalous state of US-Iraq relations, though we recognize that the road towards improvement is a long one.⁶²

With the support of Saddam Hussein, the US hoped that the regime in Tehran could not only be contained but perhaps even abolished. That Iran would emerge victorious from the First Gulf War, which was started by Saddam Hussein on 22 September 1980, was horrific for President Ronald Reagan. In order to officially support Iraq in the war against Iran, the US removed the Baghdad regime from the blacklist of terrorism-supporting states in February 1982. Between 1983 and 1987, not only did Iraq receive trade credits equivalent to several hundred million US dollars, but the US also supplied Iraq with important intelligence. Furthermore, Washington encouraged its European partners to co-operate with Baghdad. In addition to weapons from the UK and France, Baghdad received indirect support for the construction of biological and chemical weapons factories: "German firms also rushed in without much compunction, not only selling Iraq large numbers of trucks and automobiles but also building vast complexes for Iraq's chemical warfare, biological warfare, and ballistic missiles program".⁶³ Through the use of Iraqi chemical weapons, which, according to the UN, the Baghdad regime could never have produced without foreign aid,⁶⁴ approximately

50,000 Iranian soldiers were wounded during the First Gulf War, and another 5,000 were killed.⁶⁵ This massive use of chemical weapons by Iraq, which was also directed against its own people and which was a serious violation of the Geneva Protocol of 1925, did not, however, generate a reaction from the international community. In fact, the US showed the opposite reaction. As former US Ambassador Peter W. Galbraith writes: "...when Iraq turned its chemical weapons on the Kurds in 1988, killing 5,000 in the town of Halabja, the Reagan administration sought to obscure responsibility by falsely suggesting Iran was also responsible."⁶⁶ In the following years, the US even intensified the cooperation with Saddam Hussein:

The next year [1989], President George H.W. Bush's administration actually doubled US financial credits for Iraq. A week before Hussein invaded Kuwait, the administration vociferously opposed legislation that would have conditioned US assistance to Iraq on a commitment not to use chemical weapons and to stop the genocide against the Kurds.⁶⁷

In Iran, there was a reversal in the evaluation of WMD. Ayatollah Khomeini had originally deemed the use and possession of WMD as being incompatible with Islam. Iran therefore suspended its nuclear programme, which had been initiated under the Shah with Western help.⁶⁸ Today, Iran is a contracting party of the Chemical and Biological Weapons Convention and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Treaty (NPT). But the First Gulf War taught Iran that such agreements do not guarantee protection and that Tehran must provide for its own self-defence.⁶⁹ After 1984, Khomeini was convinced that nuclear weapons were a necessary means of deterrence and self-defence.⁷⁰ Only a few years later, Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaker of the Iranian parliament (*Majlis*), declared that:

Chemical and biological weapons are the poor man's atomic bombs and can easily be produced. We should at least consider them for our defence. Although the use of such weapons is inhuman, the war taught us that international laws are only scraps of paper.⁷¹

The Iranian self-perception as a vulnerable state was responsible for a fundamental change in the direction of security policy. Khomeini's rejection of WMD was not justified by power politics. The experience of political impotence in the mid-1980s led Khomeini to believe for the first time that nuclear weapons were a rational and power-political means of deterrence and self-defence. This sense of treat and vulnerability has remained unchanged.

The protection of the regime

Even today, Iran fears that the US could attempt to bring about a regime change. The Cuban Missile Crisis proved that the perception of intention does not need to have anything in common with actual intentions.

It is therefore not important whether or not the US had really been working towards a regime change in Tehran (or perhaps even still is). It is only important that US policy toward Iran had created this impression (and still does).

Since Ronald Reagan, who actively support Saddam Hussein's Iraq against Iran, no U.S. president has abandoned the aggressive rhetoric toward Tehran; no matter whether Republican or Democrat. In 1994, Bill Clinton dubbed Iran a "rogue state". In 1995, he imposed strict oil and trade sanctions against Tehran and practically prevented all trade between the US and Iran. George W. Bush followed this line, and included Iran among the "axis of evil", together with Iraq and North Korea, in his State of the Union Address on 29 January 2002:

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.⁷²

Iran perceived Bush's speech to have a special meaning. Not only did this end the brief phase of strategic cooperation between Washington and Tehran after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan,⁷³ but it also encouraged⁷⁴ Iran to believe

that nuclear weapons are a necessary means of self-defence. The US had led regime change in Iraq, and in October 2006, Pyongyang only briefly declared its possession of atomic weapons before Washington provided a security guarantee.⁷⁵ However, no such guarantee has been made for Iran.

Iran has shown a general interest in de-escalation. In 2003, immediately after the start of Operation “Iraqi Freedom”, President Mohammad Khatami explored the options for a sustainable reconciliation with the US. Via the Swiss ambassador to Tehran, Khatami shared with Bush a concrete road map for the cessation of enmity between the two countries. Khatami offered to stop supporting militant Palestinian groups, to transform Hezbollah into a purely political organisation, to work to for a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine and to disclose its own nuclear programme. In return, Iran demanded the lifting of US sanctions, free access to civilian nuclear technology and security guarantees.⁷⁶ Bush was also to withdraw his statement about Iran being part of the “axis of evil”.⁷⁷ But the Bush administration rejected this initiative.⁷⁸

Tit-for-tat

In the debate over Iran’s nuclear programme, it is conveniently forgotten that, next to the five official nuclear powers (the US, Russia, France, the

UK, and China), there are other non-official states with nuclear weapons: India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea. Under the NPT, none of these states should have the right to possess nuclear weapons, because according to Article IX only a state that “has manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device prior to 1 January 1967” has the right to nuclear weapons.

Given the particularly anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli tone of Iranian rhetoric and the proximity of Israel to Iran, Jerusalem will presumably perceive the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapons programme as a greater threat than the US.

On the basis of the NPT, Iran should therefore be treated no differently than North Korea, India, Pakistan and Israel.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, these nuclear powers will be tolerated. It is thereby completely irrelevant whether the legality of nuclear weapons is concerned with a democracy, dictatorship or theocracy. One might argue that since India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea are no longer party to the NPT that its provisions no longer apply. By this logic, only Iran should follow the example of North Korea and withdraw

from the NPT, and no damage would be inflicted to the non-proliferation regime. This is an unconvincing argument, and was unacceptable to the international community in the case of North Korea. The NPT now comprises 189 countries and this raises a general validity claim should it be enforced differently against Iran than North Korea or Israel.

Why Balancing Backfires

If Iran implements a specific policy, such as buying clandestine uranium centrifuges, how is this policy perceived by the US or Israel? The clandestine purchase of centrifuges may be perceived as clear and convincing evidence for an Iranian nuclear weapons programme i.e., as a threat. Given the particularly anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli tone of Iranian rhetoric and the proximity of Israel to Iran, Jerusalem will presumably perceive the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapons programme as a greater threat than the US. How the US and Israel react will depend largely (if not exclusively) on the perceived intentions of Iran.

The perceived intentions underlying on the Iranian policy are strongly influenced (not to mention determined) by an image already formed of Iran as an aggressive, anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli country. This image has been durable, and as Alexander L. George already noted in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War: “[P]olicymakers [in the US] retained their image of a hostile,

threatening regime in Tehran that would need to be ‘balanced’ in the future”.⁸⁰

The image of a state as aggressive and the perception of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing: the image influences the perception and the perception fosters the image.

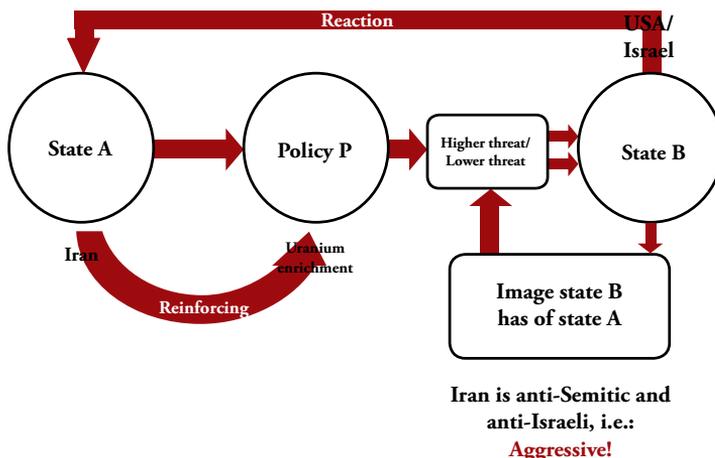
Therefore, with respect to the policy against a perceived threat, it is irrelevant whether the state (or alliance) under suspicion really has aggressive intentions (as the Kennedy administration wrongly apprehended during the Cuban Missile Crisis) or just wants to satisfy a need for security. Ultimately decisive is how the relevant key players perceive and judge the intentions of the threatening state (or alliance); a perception which is strongly influenced (not to say: determined) by an image already formed. This can be considered a vicious cycle. The image of a state as aggressive and the perception of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing: the image influences the perception and the perception fosters the image. In case of Iran this means that the image of Iran as aggressive, anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli influences the perception of Iranian policy as aggressive, and the perception of Iranian policy (as aggressive) fosters the image of Iran as an aggressive, anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli country (see Fig.

1). Therefore, with respect to the policy on Iran, it is irrelevant whether Tehran actually seeks the bomb or merely controls the nuclear fuel cycle. Balancing the perceived Iranian threat (i.e., that it is perceived as aggressive, anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli) tends to backfire. Given that balancing is not limited to joining a powerful alliance (like NATO) or building up arms, two classical forms of balancing, but refers to all state strategies intended to reduce a perceived threat by improving the security situation of the threatened state(s) in comparison to the state(s) perceived as a threat.⁸¹ Therefore, to balance against Iran means de facto to threaten Iran. This may only convince the leaders in Teheran that full mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle (which includes the ability to build a nuclear device) is a necessary means of counter-balancing and self-defence.⁸²

Therefore, balancing against Iran will enhance (or, in the worst case, even create) rather than reduce the threat of a nuclear armed Iran by reinforcing the policy that initiated the balancing behavior in the first place.

And this means that the dynamic process just described also works the other way.⁸³ By changing Iran on the one side and the U.S. and Israel on the other, you get the same self-reinforcing vicious cycle with Iran feeling threatened and under pressure to react (see Figure 1). From Iran's perspective, having a nuclear weapons programme would then be quite rational as it is a security measure to reduce the vulnerability of the country and safeguards the regime against external attempts to bring about a regime change. At the same time, however, it leads Iran, Israel and the US to the brink of war, which will make both sides feel even more threatened and less secure.

Figure 1 (Graphic designed by the author)



From Iran's perspective, having a nuclear weapons programme is quite rational as it is a security measure: Nuclear weapons reduce the vulnerability of the country and safeguard the regime against external attempts to bring about a regime change. It also compensates for the obvious unequal treatment of the non-proliferation regime of the NPT. Iran's nuclear programme is also highly unreasonable as it leads Iran to the brink of war. Thus, the nuclear weapons programme makes security interests impossible although it was with these perceptions that made it necessary in the first place.

Is there a Possible Solution to the Conflict?

A solution to the conflict over Iran's nuclear programme is indeed still possible, but it will neither be quickly nor easily reached. This is why the conflict with Iran, which involves more than just the nuclear programme, has lasted so long. Basically, the current problem is restoring the confidence that was destroyed on both sides over the last few decades.⁸⁴ In January 2006, Tehran allowed the IAEA's seal to be removed from the enrichment plant at Natanz, which was not only a symbolic step towards the resumption of the nuclear weapons programme but also a serious blow to international confidence in the regime.

In order to defuse the conflict, one side must take the first step towards de-escalation and make concessions. This can only be the US. The US can reach out to Tehran without altering the security threat because a nuclear-armed Iran represents no significant threat to the US. Conversely, the US is the greatest threat to the regime in Tehran. Any concessions to Washington would therefore be interpreted as a sign of weakness and increase Tehran's sense of insecurity. Therefore, this step could hardly be expected.

In fact, I believe that there is no alternative to de-escalation- if the conflict with Iran is to be successfully defused. Military action against Iranian nuclear facilities would be counterproductive because it would only slow down the nuclear programme instead of permanently hindering it. If anything, an attack on Tehran would strengthen the belief that Iranian nuclear weapons are a necessary means of deterrence and self-defence.

A different rhetoric

The first step toward understanding has to be to moderate the rhetoric against Iran. Rhetoric that does not threaten Tehran with military strikes and regime change could reduce the sense of threat on the part of Iran and thus contribute to a détente. President Obama already took the first step with his "A New Beginning" speech which he gave in 2009 in Cairo

promising “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world” that is “based upon mutual interest and mutual respect”.⁸⁵ Now, in his second presidential term, he has to uphold this promise, which also addresses the Iranians and which offers direct talks and the delegation of an US ambassador to Tehran.

Accepting the realities

The US and Europe must deal with the reality of the Iranian theocracy and accept Khamenei as an interlocutor. In the end it is Khamenei who will make decisions regarding the realignment of Iranian security policy. Thus,

contacts with religious leaders of Iran are prerequisite to increasing the feeling of security also on the part of US and its allies. Therefore, it is counterproductive to de-legitimise Khamenei as a “non-elected decision maker”.⁸⁶ The election of Hassan Rouhani as Iranian president also offers a chance for president Obama to initiate a new start. Rouhani is not Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; this could make it easier for the US to accept the reality of an Islamic state.⁸⁷

Sanctions

The system of sanctions against Iran has long been an integral part of robust diplomacy in the dispute over its nuclear programme. However, the penalty system should be modified so that it does not simply escalate the conflict.

First, the US (as a veto power in the UN Security Council) should show probable cause that the offer of “double suspension” will continue to

be maintained.

The basic idea is that the sanctions will be suspended if Iran suspends its uranium enrichment programme. In an additional step, Tehran must be convinced that the system of sanctions has a strictly limited

focus: to ensure compliance with the provisions of the NPT. Iran, particularly with respect to Pakistan, has repeatedly stated that it has a vital interest in a reliable non-proliferation regime. The diplomatic task is therefore to dispel the deep-seated fears on the part of Tehran: that the sanctions are neither aimed at changing the system nor at destroying Iran’s economy nor are they meant to punish Iran.⁸⁸ As Robert Jervis writes, a plausible scenario for US leaders could be to “to try to communicate that they

are ready for an agreement by letting the Iranian regime know that they are studying how to suspend sanctions in stages and developing various forms of security guarantees".⁸⁹

Security

The Iranian nuclear programme is a rational response to perceived security threats to the country and regime.⁹⁰ A sustainable solution to the nuclear dispute must therefore aim to sustainably change these perceptions.

The diplomatic task is therefore to dispel the deep-seated fears on the part of Tehran: that the sanctions are neither aimed at changing the system nor at destroying Iran's economy nor are they meant to punish Iran

The focus is once again on the US. As it did against North Korea⁹¹ and probably also against Muammar al-Gaddafi's Libya, Washington must present Tehran with a credible offer of regime security. In 2003, Tripoli abandoned its WMD programme,⁹² and in 2005, Pyongyang had been contractually obliged to dismantle its plutonium reactor (which could not, however, prevent the nuclear test in 2006).

The road map that was prepared by Khatami in 2003 could serve as a basis for the offer to Tehran. It addresses the essential concerns of both sides: Iran would accept the two-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict, cease support for militant Palestinian groups and disclose its nuclear programme. In return, Iran would receive explicit security guarantees from the US and the assurance that Iran's sovereign rights to civilian use of nuclear energy would remain intact.

If Tehran assesses the US security guarantee to be credible and alters its perception on the importance of the nuclear programme, adhering to the military nuclear programme would then be irrational. Because Iran's nuclear programme would make the security guarantee of the US impossible, the nuclear programme itself would present a perceived threat to security. The pursuit of atomic weapons would thus be no longer a rational means of self-defence.

The possible measures described focus on the underlying causes of the perceived crisis with Iran and aim to enhance the security of the actors involved (Iran, Israel and the US) without implementing the core tenet of all balancing strategies: to weaken the threatening state. What would be the alternative to such an approach? It would be a perpetual conflict that is constantly at the brink of a devastating war. Here, once again, the current Iranian nuclear crisis resembles

the Cuban Missile Crisis: The warning Khrushchev issued to Kennedy at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis is no less true:

Mr. President, we and you ought not now to pull on the end of the rope in

which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it. And then it will be necessary to cut that knot.⁹³

Endnotes

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- 10 *Ibid.*
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- 13 Power or capability is here understood as an aggregate concept that encompasses a state’s total re-sources, such as its population, industrial and military capability and technological prowess (Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 22).

- 14 He, "Undermining Adversaries", p. 161.
- 15 Ibid., p. 163.
- 16 Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 118- 221.
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- 31 From a current perspective, Khrushchev’s decision to secretly deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba appears irrational and highly risky: How could Khrushchev believe that the US would tolerate nuclear missiles that could easily reach Washington in its own backyard? In order to understand why Khrushchev held to the deployment of the missiles in Cuba, even though this was obviously irrational, one must try to understand why he wanted to deploy missiles there in the first place. The same applies to Iran’s adherence to the nuclear programme despite the massive, long-standing and sustained international pressure. Here, one must also try to understand why Tehran has apparently decided to resume its nuclear programme and military development.
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- 33 Juan Carlos Rodríguez, *The Inevitable Battle: From the Bay Of Pigs to Playa Girón*, Havana, Editorial Capitán San Luis, 2009, pp. 39-114.
- 34 Jacinto Valdés-Dapena, *Operation Mongoose: Prelude of a Direct Invasion on Cuba*, Havana, Editorial Capitán San Luis, 2004, pp. 26-61.
- 35 Nikita Khrushchev, “Letter From Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy”, at http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/volume_vi/exchanges.html [last visited 29 March 2014].
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- 38 Quoted in Ibid.
- 39 Ibid., p. 34.
- 40 Quoted in Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 39. But, as Lebow and Stein write, this was just part of the story: “I [Harriman] laughed. He [Khrushchev] asked, ‘What are you laughing about?’ I said, ‘What you’re talking about would lead to war, and I know you’re too sensible a man to want to have war.’ He stopped a minute and looked at me and said, ‘You’re right.’” (Quoted in Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, p. 390).

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- 52 This quote stems from the movie "War Games" (1983), in which the computer program responsible for the national defence of the United States recognises that the game "Thermonuclear War" cannot be won; it therefore concludes that there is only one reasonable move: not to play. This is the basic idea of nuclear deterrence.
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- 80 Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy*, Washington, United States Institute of Peace Press 1993, p. 34.
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