

Nuclear Weapons Proliferation Theory and the Case of Iran

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International relations scholars have attempted to develop a theory of nuclear weapons proliferation using three primary frameworks: systemic, domestic, and normative. Analyses under these frameworks depict Iran's elites as having pursued a nuclear capability chiefly to promote regime development and also in an attempt to propel itself to great power status and international prestige. To a large extent, this counters the systemic argument that states mainly proliferate when faced with a viable, external threat. An examination of the particular case of Iran demonstrates that domestic politics and established norms can be as predictive of nuclear proliferation tendencies as the security argument, which is the most frequently applied model to proliferation cases. Each is context-dependent and one theory of nuclear proliferation will not apply automatically to every case, thus policy-makers must not simply expect states to only proliferate when faced with outside challenges.

The literature directed toward the questions surrounding nuclear weapons abstention, proliferation and penitence (Stein, 2001) attempts to provide answers, and give clues as to why states would potentially develop a nuclear weapons capacity. Although nuclear proliferation patterns have been assessed thoroughly in light of existing international relations theories, there is still a certain enigma attached to the nuclear question (Ogilvie-White, 1996). Still, many questions can be answered vis-à-vis security considerations on the systemic and sub-systemic levels, through domestic bureaucratic and organizational behavior, and by looking at international norms that shape and constrain states by attaching status symbols to adherents or nonconformists. Potential policy considerations can be pursued to either prevent nuclear weapons proliferation in cases that generate an unstable or unacceptable security situation, or in order to understand how to avert similar cases that will inevitably arise.

This article assesses the contributions that have been made to the nuclear proliferation question and their general validity and individual applicability to the case of Iran. It looks at Middle Eastern regional dynamics, the sub-systemic issues between Iran and certain other states, Iran's domestic politics, cultural identity, and international normative factors that influence its nuclear weapons program. After a disambiguation of the Iranian nuclear conundrum, policy recommendations are prescribed to prevent its nuclear weapons development and also serve to prevent future proliferant cases similar to Iran. Although the Iranian case is complex, government elites and status motivations are the primary causal

factors in its pursuit of nuclear weapons and as such, the U.S. must adjust its policies accordingly.

WHY IRAN SHOULD NOT ACQUIRE THE BOMB

If Iran developed a nuclear weapons capability, it would present a problematic scenario for the following reasons: 1) a multipolar, nuclear Middle East presents a situation where deterrence is ineffective, as the origination of the attack may not be obvious; 2) in a region with constant conventional war, a nuclear weapons attack is much more likely; and 3) the prospect of a terrorist organization obtaining access to nuclear weapons would increase. Iran maintains strong ties with Hezbollah and Hamas, Palestinian and Islamic Jihad, and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command and because the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has control over security at Iran's nuclear facilities, it would be unable to ensure centralized control over nuclear weapons or fissile material (Sagan, 2006).

Also, if Iran eventually acquired nuclear weapons, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey would likely succumb to the temptation of keeping up with their threatening neighbor. Even if the international community could live with a nuclear Iran (Posen, 2006)—where the West, Russian, or China would extend nuclear umbrellas over these three countries and any other threatened country in the region—there is still an incentive to prevent similar, future proliferant cases using the models developed here.

SECURITY EXPLANATION

According to neorealist international relations theory, states

depict fearfulness (Thayer, 1995) as they are in a constant struggle due to the anarchic international environment and must act in their self-interest to prevent destruction (Waltz, 1979). This is based on the relative gains assumption that “today’s friend may be tomorrow’s enemy in war, and fear that achievements of joint gains...might produce a more dangerous potential foe in the future” (Grieco, 1988). States must focus on augmenting their strategic capabilities in order to prevent the possibility of foreign encroachment on their territory (Brooks, 1997).¹ Concerned with relative power, the neorealist conception of strategic power is based on the Waltzian notion that “an agent is powerful to the extent that he affects others more than they affect him” (Baldwin, 1993; Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1986; Wohlforth, 1993).²

In regards to nuclear weapons programs, neorealists are interested in power structures or balances of power and how they contribute to the likelihood of regional or global proliferation. Benjamin Frankel asserts the “change that will most directly influence the acceleration of nuclear proliferation is the move away from bipolarity” (Frankel, 1993), for in a bipolar system, superpowers have the capability of assuaging nuclear spread by functioning as “security providers” (Mearsheimer, 1990; Waltz, 1981). According to Mearsheimer, a bipolar structure with the presence of nuclear weapons is more stable and evenly balanced than a multipolar structure without nuclear proliferation because the coordination of alliances and diplomacy—or external balancing—is less efficient than mobilizing internal military resources to focus on merely one aggressor or security gap. In the end, unequal poles increase the probability of successful aggression.

Nuclear weapons serve as a powerful defense and deterrent against potential conventional or nuclear weapons aggressors. Most analysts seem to agree that perceived threats to national security provide the fundamental drive for nuclear weapons acquisition (Bahgat, 2006). Concerning regional rivals, eight case-studies explored by Kurt Campbell and R. J. Einhorn revealed that the prime motivating factor for the development of a nuclear weapons capability is acquisition by a neighboring hostile state (Campbell & Einhorn, 2004; Bahgat, 2006). This follows the logic of T.V. Paul’s analysis, that in high-conflict regions, states have the utmost incentive to obtain nuclear weapons. These regions are characterized by long-standing enmities, where states act with zero-sum mentalities that project security concerns before other considerations. Often, this rivalry will consist of states “engaged in a protracted conflict or enduring rivalry with an already existing or an emerging nuclear weapon state” (Paul, 2000).

¹Brooks explains the divergent views of classical realists and neorealists, where neorealists favor a “possibilistic” view of hostile state behavior and classical realists assert a more “probabilistic” assumption of state intentions.

²William Wohlforth holds that defining power as control leads inevitably to a tautological analysis, which is not very useful for policy-makers and “appears to be a dubious analytical exercise.”

The “more may be better” logic (Sagan & Waltz, 2003) supposes that controlled horizontal proliferation among the great powers is a better policy than nonproliferation as it will encourage further caution in states considering potential war, thus eliminating war-prone and costly conventional military strategizing (Waltz, 1990; Van Evera, 1990; Rosen, 1977).³ A more neo-classical realist, Richard Betts, argues that a vertical spread among great powers would severely limit the horizontal spread of nuclear weapons to smaller security-conscious states (Betts, 1993; Frankel, 1993).⁴ From the security perspective, horizontal expansion of nuclear weapons into Germany and the Ukraine could have countered the Soviet asymmetrical threat of nuclear blackmail or aggression and ultimately could have more easily prevented a potential outbreak of war (Mearsheimer, 1990; 1993).⁵ Under this framework, the U.S. developed the bomb in response to the German nuclear program (Rhodes, 1986); the French advanced a force de dissuasion to offset the Soviet threat and out of fear that the U.S. nuclear umbrella was tenuous (Frankel, 1993);⁶ and Israel proliferated due to overwhelming conventional military threats in the Middle East (Feldman, 1997).⁷ So according to the security model, states make the decision to develop nuclear weapons when faced with extant security threats and when they simultaneously have no resort to any other equitable strategic counter-method.

CRITICISMS

It is important to recognize the merits of one explanation for certain nuclear proliferant cases while acknowledging its weaknesses in elucidating others (Sagan, 1996). It would follow that there cannot be “a ‘template or a ‘one-size-fits-all’ non-proliferation policy that...can apply mechanically to all WMD proliferators,” as each case is context-dependent (Lobell, 2006; Potter, 1982).⁸ Explanations for nuclear weapons

³As a “proliferation optimist,” Steven Rosen argues that mutual deterrence in the Middle East may be a viable option. An understanding of the consequences of proliferation has potential implications for certain advocates of the security explanation. If great-power states do little to inhibit the spread of nuclear technology, it may increase the ease and thus, the tendency of states to proliferate.

⁴Betts contends that “strategic realities make the have nots’ moral arguments against the superpowers irrelevant” (p. 101). Frankel states that “Vertical nuclear proliferation inhibits horizontal nuclear proliferation.”

⁵As we know, a multipolar structure similar to pre-war, proximate Europe never followed the Cold War, thus somewhat invalidating Mearsheimer’s prediction.

⁶For the French case, see Frankel’s analysis of Lacouture’s quoting De Gaulle, that De Gaulle did not trust that the U.S. would use nuclear weapons in defense of France were the USSR to invade western Europe.

⁷Feldman recounts how Israel’s founding father and first prime minister—David Ben Gurion—pushed nuclear weapons development to achieve a qualitative advantage over Arab quantitatively superior forces. These weapons would serve as a “great equalizer” (p. 95).

⁸Potter deems most nonproliferation policies inadequate as they fail to take into account context-dependency.

cases should comprise political, military, and economic considerations, each applied in varying degrees and across multi-systemic contexts (Epstein, 1977). Scott Sagan acknowledges that most current and past proliferant cases are best explained by the security model, but he deems this seemingly ubiquitous approach inadequate as it fails to consider “multicausality” in determining why states proliferate. Policy-makers would find a richer explanation in also looking at intricate bureaucratic *raison d'être* or state identity and status motivations (Sagan, 1996). Relying on one explanation for diagnosing proliferation tendencies (or non-tendencies) of states would potentially lead to policy failures, due to oversimplification and a failure to grasp international political complexities.

In looking at regional dynamics in the Middle East and East Asia, Etel Solingen argues that the neorealist position concerning the likelihood of proliferation in a multipolar system was mostly correct for the Middle East, but inaccurate for East Asia. She further maintains that even states facing severe security dilemmas like Egypt and Japan—who also had the economic capability and technological know-how—failed to proliferate, while states with slighter security risks, such as Libya and Iraq in the 1970's, attempted to develop a nuclear weapons program. A security commitment or nuclear umbrella from the U.S. towards Egypt and Japan has not been “absolute, inclusive, unlimited, or unconditional” (Solinigen, 2007). Also, security commitments from Russia and China have failed to prevent eventual North Korean proliferation.

Explaining structural causes of proliferation in East Asia and elsewhere is problematic for the security explanation. In responding to the neorealist analysis of systemic incentives for developing weapons programs, Solingen contends that a change in the regional structure of the Far East—i.e. the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, the relative decline of Japanese power, and direct competition between China and the U.S.—failed to bring about typical security predictions for every non-nuclear weapons state besides North Korea (Christensen, 1999; Friedberg, 1993).⁹ Argentina, Brazil, and Egypt eventually rescinded their nuclear weapons programs even when faced with glaring structural inequalities and Algeria pursued nuclear weapons without the need to balance against any existential rivals (Chafetz, Abramson, and Grillot, 1996; Serrano, 1994).¹⁰ Structure as a sole consideration in the nuclear puzzle is inadequate.

Waltz has allowed that although the U.S. opposes a North Korean nuclear weapon, “in the past half-century, no country has been able to prevent other countries from going nuclear if they were determined to do so” (Sagan & Waltz, 2003). Also, Betts has maintained that security concerns alone may be an insufficient indicator regarding nuclear pro-

liferation (Betts, 2000; Solingen, 2007). The self-help contention based in the security model is problematic because its explanation of state proliferation varies so widely that it is impossible to distinctively predict which states will proliferate. The security model fails the test of falsifiability, as, “so many options can be made to fit vague notions of security maximization a posteriori...” (Solinigen, 2007). Although (neo)realism may explain nuclear acquisition satisfactorily in many cases, numerous states still interact with adversaries devoid of proliferation, thus neorealists have a difficult time explaining forbearance and rescission.

DOMESTIC POLITICS EXPLANATION

The domestic politics model centers on the parochial interests of actors within the state who either support or dissuade centralized decision-makers to develop nuclear weapons programs (Sagan, 1996). As Jack Snyder argues, “recent exponents of Realism in international relations have been wrong in looking exclusively to states as the irreducible atoms whose power and interests are to be assessed...Machiavelli, Thucydides, and even Hans Morgenthau understood political realism in this broader way, but for the most part more recent Realists have not” (Snyder, 1991). The most common domestic actors studied consist of 1) a state's nuclear energy establishment, which wields substantial influence over decision makers; 2) military leaders or bureaucracies interested in the expansion of nuclear power; and 3) prominent politicians and leaders whose party or constituency allows or supports nuclear proliferation based on identifiable objectives (Sagan, 1996). Depending on a state's political opportunity structure—“comprised of specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization” (Kitschelt, 1986)—other domestic players i.e. protest and interest groups and the media potentially influence nuclear decision-making.

The domestic politics model in international relations theory has only recently been pursued as an explanatory instrument for why states pursue or decline nuclear weapons programs (Solinigen, 2007).¹¹ More generally, an abundant literature has dealt with the issue of bureaucratic politics and organizational theory—how sub-state actors vie for power and influence based on subjectively perceived agendas (Allison, 1969; Allison & Halperin, 1972; Halperin, 1974). These previous analyses shed light on how domestic actors bargain and compromise when given a set of circumstances, and the final decision that is made culminates in a consensus or “political resultant” (Rosati, 1981). In order for domestic political theory to act as an independent variable in international relations—with predictive power in itself, and where an interna-

⁹According to these authors, East Asia has been one of the likeliest regions in the world to spiral into conflict post-Cold War.

¹⁰For the security models explanation and response to the Argentina/Brazil “non-conflict,” see Serrano.

¹¹Solinigen argues that the influence of nuclear weapons proliferation on domestic political concerns has been insufficiently considered in understanding the nuclear actions of states. For a few, see Flank, 1993; Pinston, 2003; Cohen and Frankel, 1990; and Liberman, 2001.

tional actor (state) is more complex than its cumulative effect—the state must be viewed as non-unitary, which is diametrically opposed to neorealist structural theory and its critique of reductionism (Wendt, 1987; Waltz, 1979).¹² If a state's foreign policy is part of the international politics equation (which neorealists denounce), then domestic political considerations are necessary ingredients (Fearon, 1998).¹³ This would mean that relative power is not the sole factor in determining state action and that objective, unified foreign policy is a byproduct of several competing sub-state actors. It is as Morton Halperin illustrates: the resolve to develop nuclear weapons is made possible by decisions of foremost individuals within the scientific and defense establishments of a state (Halperin, 1974). So Homi Babha was the necessary ingredient in the Indian nuclear weapons program (Reiss, 1988:) when faced with a Chinese and Pakistani nuclear threat (Ganguly, 1999);¹⁴ the Atomic Energy Board in South Africa functioned as the propeller towards proliferation, even though nuclear weapons were viewed as unnecessary strategically (Betts, 1979); and Colonel Muammar Qadhafi, even with the supposed Israeli threat to Libyan national security, was an essential component in their nuclear weapons program (Sinai, 1997).

CRITICISMS

Stephen Krasner holds that a bureaucratic construal of foreign policy is “misleading, dangerous, and compelling.” Respectively, the bureaucratic model 1) shrouds the power of the president; 2) undercuts democracy by limiting accountability; and 3) is inadequate because it lacks finite explanative power due to unlimited post hoc reinterpretations (1972). The question of international relations theory, or a potential theory of nuclear proliferation, is “not whether the isolation of a realm is realistic, but whether it is useful. And usefulness is judged by the explanatory and predictive powers of the theory that may be fashioned” (Waltz, 1979).

Proponents of the security model as the main thrust towards nuclear proliferation argue that while bureaucratic politics play a role in a state's nuclear weapons program, specific organizations and individuals are not necessary to bring about the formation of a nuclear weapons capability (Thayer, 1995). So, if Homi Bhabha in India, Pierre Guillaumat in France and FDR in the U.S. had never existed, these countries would have still developed a nuclear weapons program

even if it happened at different points because threats to their security were nonetheless anteriorly perceived throughout history. The U.S. and others developed nuclear weapons—as dictated by centralized policy—aimed at responding to an external threat, so domestic politicking led by specific individuals or groups would not be a necessary and distinguishable component in the nuclear weapons puzzle.

NORMS EXPLANATION

A norm is defined as “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).¹⁵ Nuclear weapons attainment or restraint falls within the norms framework if a social player acts so as to symbolically “shape and reflect” their identity or status to others (Sagan, 1996), while a state's modernity or legitimacy often rests in the quality of their military and weaponry (Suchman & Eyre, 1992). The norms model maintains an assumption that security, domestic politics, technological capabilities¹⁶ and other causal variables in the creation of nuclear weapons programs are missing an essential component: i.e. all of these explanations have “a socially constructed meaning and a socially oriented objective” and these accounts “can never be fully understood or predicted independently of their social context” (Eyre, Suchman, & Alexander, 1986; Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986). Accordingly, the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) has shifted international norms and values concerning the acquirement of a nuclear weapons capability to taboo-status for any prospective proliferator (Tannenwald, 2005; Sagan, 1996).

A regime exists in international politics when interaction between parties is constrained and actors—either in self-interest or otherwise—abstain from independent decision-making and come together to realize common interests (Stein, 1982).¹⁷ International regimes are the “sets of rules, norms, and procedures that regulate behavior and control its effects in international affairs” (Nye, 1981). The nonproliferation norm along with other ‘security regimes’ reveal a potent influence in interstate security cooperation, international law, national status motivations and domestic law. West Germany (and later Germany) and Japan abstained from nuclear weapons proliferation, and Ukraine and Belarus complied with pressures and constraints required by the NPT (Potter, 1995), all while facing legitimate threats. This gives credence

¹²Neorealists have steered clear of reductionism that does not allow for systemic influences to serve intervening roles towards the conversion of domestic constraints into foreign policy. Alexander Wendt contends that there is no structural theory in neorealism, only systemic theory. Kenneth Waltz states that the “units of an anarchic system are functionally undifferentiated.”

¹³Fearon argues that foreign policy is either the direct or unintended result of the very events neorealism attempts to explain (p. 293)

¹⁴Ganguly identifies five stages in India's nuclear weapons development, of which the Chinese and Pakistani threat were only a small part.

¹⁵Finnemore and Sikkink discuss the differences between 1) regulative norms, which constrain behavior, 2) constitutive norms, which create new actors, identities and interests, and the understudied 3) prescriptive norms, which evaluate the “appropriateness” of behavior.

¹⁶Suchman and Eyre label these differently. They develop their theory of nuclear weapons procurement as a sociological phenomenon using strategic functional, factional, and geopolitical constructs. See p. 140.

¹⁷Stein holds that “interests determine regimes” and that structural model, e.g. distribution of power, is but one factor in explaining state preferences.

to the concept that states do not rely solely on strategic considerations to determine abstention from or abrogation of nuclear weapons programs.

Nuclear weapons can also be seen as serving a physical, strategic function, but the symbols attached to them may present a more powerful insight into why states proliferate (Jervis, 1989). According to norms theory, nuclear weapons attainment or abstention is a process of socialization where decision-makers assess proliferation based on how they have been acclimated to view nuclear weapons, whether from cultural ideas, international regimes and structures, or even one's concept of state identity to name a few. For a significant norm to take hold in the domestic or international consciousness it must establish legitimacy by influencing conduct and engendering obligatory and enduring postures by social actors who either commit to the customary standard or feel regret or a sense of justification for deviating (Cortell & Davis, 2000). Thus, norms provide the explanation that interstate accord and predictability are achievable without a supra-state arbiter or rule enforcer (Raymond, 1997).

CRITICISMS

According to the neorealist critique, accession to the NPT does not indicate a state's genuine renunciation of nuclear weapons, only that nuclear weapons do not serve a strategic purpose at the time of abstention. So a state is more likely to acquiesce to the stipulations of a treaty when it serves their interests and less likely if the treaty puts them at a strategic disadvantage. South Africa, Pakistan, and India found ways to evade the preventive measures of the nonproliferation regime, and Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—all signatories to the NPT—developed nuclear weapons programs despite the consequences (Frankel, 1993). The nuclear nonproliferation regime complicates the process of nuclear weapons attainment, and as a result, compels states to proliferate opaquely (Thayer, 1995).

The nuclear nonproliferation regime has a hard time preventing nuclear weapons proliferation when states have heightened security concerns. While the NPT and other preventive nuclear regimes concentrate on the supply side and attempt to keep states from obtaining important technologies that would aid in the creation of a nuclear weapons capability, they fail to focus on the problems of insecurity that lead to nuclear weapons proliferation (Thayer, 1995). States facing an existential security dilemma are more likely to abstain from nuclear weapons proliferation if they have security guarantees from a great-power ally than if they merely feel customarily compelled to remain nonnuclear (Frankel, 1993). Even if the nonproliferation regime is successful at increasing the financial and opportunity costs to states seeking a nuclear weapons capability, as these extra costs are only moderate, they are not enough of a disincentive to refrain from pursuing nuclear weapons (Thayer, 1995). As in the case with Iran, the NPT has proven incapable of handling a dogged proliferator and attempts to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue under the

rubric of the NPT has only been problematic. The NPT incorrectly expects that nonnuclear states will determine it is not in their interest to proliferate (Landau, 2006:58).

IRAN AS A CASE STUDY

The recently released National Intelligence Estimate (November, 2007) on Iran's nuclear intentions and capabilities indicated that until fall of 2003, military entities were working to develop a nuclear weapons capability. However, the termination of that part of the program does not represent a termination of the entire nuclear weapons program. The report has calculated with "low confidence" that Iran has imported some weapons-usable fissile material, but with "moderate-to-high confidence" that Iran does not have enough for a complete nuclear weapon. Iran's civilian uranium enrichment program has progressed—which could be applied to the construction of nuclear weapons—and Iran continues to produce enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) that could also be used for a nuclear weapon. At its current rate of enrichment, Iran would be technically capable of producing a weapon between the years 2010 and 2015. The report also suggests with moderate confidence that persuading Iran to forgo nuclear weapons will be difficult, as the Iranian leadership seemingly views its nuclear weapons program as inextricably linked with its broader foreign policy and national security objectives and, based on the continuation of Iran's "considerable efforts" to develop a nuclear weapon from the late 1980's to 2003, it is unlikely to rescind its program.¹⁸ In other words, the problem persists.

STRUCTURAL SECURITY CONCERNS

The inherently unstable, asymmetric, and security-centric structure in the greater Middle East contributes to the assessment that there is a "WMD war waiting to happen" in the region (Schneider, 1999). This is partly due to "overlapping power balances" (Spiegel, 2001) across the various sub-regions: Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf, and numerous peripheral states in South/Southwest Asia or North Africa (Cordesman, 2004). An asymmetric balance exists in the Eastern Mediterranean, consisting of the two superior military powers—Israel and Egypt—in relative peace, with Israel maintaining a direct, adversarial relationship toward the two-pronged and less powerful opposing forces of 1) Hezbollah, which is funded and supported by Syria and Iran, and also 2) the Palestinians with some Iranian support. The Gulf has been dominated by the Iran-Iraq conflict, but with persistent engagement by Saudi Arabia, along with United States and United Kingdom manipulation (Cordesman, 2004).

Instability in the Gulf has been of continual duration since the 1970s with the lead up to the Iran-Iraq War and

¹⁸National Intelligence Estimate, "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," November 2007, http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf.

later during the second and third Gulf Wars between Iraq and U.S.-led coalitions. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq has to a large extent contributed to the Gulf's chronic volatility and had a "traumatic impact" on intraregional dynamics, particularly since Iraq previously served as Gulf stabilizer and also as a steady "link" for Arab-Israeli balance (Kam, 2003).¹⁹ The eradication of Iraq's military capability (and Saddam Hussein) is a potential benefit to Iranian and Israeli security and both Iran and Turkey will find interference on Iraqi territory much less complicated. Also, Iraq was a primary precipitator of the arms race—specifically nuclear weapons—in the region and without a nuclear threat, Iran, Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia will find it less necessary to proliferate.

As a result of the Iraq War, the power balance has shifted and expanded from an Iran-Iraq strategic equilibrium in the Gulf to a greater Middle East American dominance allied with Britain and Israel, and a wary Egyptian and Saudi Arabian support aimed at pressuring radical states—like Iran and Syria—to give up nuclear proliferation and (U.S. labeled) terrorist group support and funding (Terhalle, 2007; Fuller, 2006).²⁰ Iran, although having developed a nuclear energy program for almost 50 years and having pursued nuclear weapons to counteract an Iraqi nuclear threat, has now felt the need to expand into uranium enrichment to the point of weapons capability and possibly nuclear weapons proliferation as a result of this new asymmetric balance and extant threat emanating from the United States (Shaffer, 2003).²¹

As stated above, the security explanation fits the systemic set-up in the Middle East. Regional balancing actors in the Gulf and among Arab-Israeli states have tended to operate according to (neo)realist expectations, pursuing policies of security maximization in order to deter prospective territorial encroachers (Hinnebusch, 2003).²² Iran's security dilemma consists of "real" and "perceived" qualitative differences in its conventional and WMD capabilities versus U.S. and

Israeli capabilities. As Ray Takeyh put it, the "paradox of the post-September 11 Middle East is that although Iran's security has improved through the removal of Saddam and the Taliban in Afghanistan, its feelings of insecurity have intensified" (Takeyh, 2003). As an example to Iran (and the rest of the Middle East), Iraqi conventional forces were no match for American qualitatively superior, military power in the Iraq War of 2003. Considering the American-favored asymmetric balance, but more important for the long-term—Israeli nuclear weapons preponderance—the only real guarantee of security Iran possesses is to offset a nuclear weapons threat²³ with a nuclear weapons program of its own.

The U.S. currently has its hands full with Iraq, which makes an attack on Iran much more difficult and also gives Iran simple targets for reprisal (Gasiorowski, 2007). As a result, its ability to impose change politically and militarily is limited and it is forced to act more like a great power balancer rather than as regional hegemon. Also, Iraq is currently unable to wield effective military force and balance against Iran and must rely on the United States to balance against an increasing Iranian presence (Kam, 2003). However, due to its decreased power position, the U.S. is incapable of effectively shifting the nuclear proliferation policies of Iran through unilateral sanctions or military action.²⁴ Economic sanctions on Iran have had some impact and stalled industrial and business progress particularly in the oil sector (Beehner, 2006; Pollack & Takeyh, 2005). Nevertheless, Iran's nuclear ambitions continue despite increasing international pressure.

With its strategic incentive to proliferate against an Iraqi threat gone, an unlikely invasion by the U.S. across either the Iraq or Afghanistan border, and an impotent Israeli political and conventional military force—as demonstrated by the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war with Hezbollah—it would appear that one of the main reasons behind Iran's nuclear program is Israel's possession of a nuclear weapons capability. However, Israel is primarily posturing against Iran because of the prospect of an undeterrable Iranian nuclear capability that could destroy three-quarters of the Israeli population if it were directed towards the narrow strip of coastline from Ashkelon

¹⁹Kam notes that Iraq had previously played a role in all the major wars between Israel and the Arabs (pp. 106-07).

²⁰The validity of a religiously-connected Iranian-Syrian-Iraqi-Hezbollah alliance—or "Shia Crescent"—is disputed. See Fouad Ajami, "Heart of Darkness," *The Wall Street Journal* (September 28, 2005). The rise in "Shiism" has been undercut by international and domestic politics, economic uncertainty, security concerns, nationalism and refusal to rule by Islamic law throughout the region. Also, Graham Fuller points out that the Sunni regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are treating the partnership as an eventuality even though the Iranian-Hizballah tie, in particular, is not so much a religious as a strategic alliance

²¹Shaffer states that the "original motivation for acquiring nuclear weapons for Tehran has been lost" and that their program now is a "way to deter the United States from creating a fate for the Iranian government similar to that of Hussein's regime."

²²Hinnebusch recognizes that realism is the "main feature" of states in the Middle East, but also points out that neorealist theory falls short in explaining change within the region and also the cause of its anarchical nature.

²³The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United State of America* 2006. The document lays out a "New Triad" offensive and defensive posture that will make use of nuclear (and conventional) weapons to deter potential adversaries—Iran, in particular—and to also fulfill security commitments to U.S. allies.

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²⁵Iran has installed around 3,000 centrifuge machines, which would be enough to start refining usable amounts of nuclear fuel. This has progressed in the face of tougher economic and diplomatic sanctions, along with military threats. See Reuters, "Timeline: Iran's Nuclear Program," 2 Nov. 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL0218278120071102?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>.

to Haifa (Ward & Hackett, 2006). Also, Iran's possession of a nuclear bomb will only ignite additional security threats, not only from Israel, but also, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

What Iran perceives of its security situation is perhaps more telling. Iran remains, regardless of weakened U.S. or other regional intentions, vulnerable to attack on its western and eastern border by the U.S. and its regional allies, and it also shares a border with nuclear, and unstable Pakistan. In addition, Iran has witnessed the U.S. take a diplomatic stance towards North Korea—in contrast to an invasion of Iraq—indicating to them that actual possession or near-possession of a nuclear capability engenders a more moderate response by the West. Currently, a nuclear weapons capability would allow Iran to gain hegemony in the region and great-power status globally. The aim of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability may have now turned into a check on weak American influence (Takeyh, 2003) in the region or even to rally pre-emptive support for attacks against Israel (Inbar, 2006).

DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The development of Iran's nuclear program is indubitably linked to a rigorous program developed by the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the early 1970s, when he acquired Iran's first nuclear reactor from the United States. Shortly thereafter, the Shah established the Atomic Energy Organization, negotiated ten year nuclear fuel contracts with the U.S., Germany, and France, and purchased nuclear power plants from Germany and France. Also during this time, the Shah obtained \$700 million worth of yellow cake from South Africa, with an agreement to purchase up to 1,000 metric tons per year.

Although Iran complied with the safeguards of the NPT in the 1970's, it was widely believed that the Shah started a hidden nuclear weapons research program at the Amirabad Nuclear Research Center consisting of studies in weapons designs and plutonium recovery from spent reactor fuel, which also included a laser enrichment program. After the fall of the Shah, the new Khomeini government allowed much of the Shah's nuclear program to disintegrate, but then revived and pursued it with some vigor at the start of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980's (Cordesman, 2000). After the war, Rafsanjani continued the program with limited success until 2002, when the National Council of Resistance of Iran facilitated the West's discovery of Iran's undeclared nuclear activities of uranium enrichment at Natanz and heavy water production at Arak (Squassoni, 2006).

While much of Iran's nuclear weapons program was pursued in light of an existential security threat from Iraq—especially during the Iran-Iraq War—there was little strategic incentive to proliferate when the Shah initiated Iran's nuclear program in the early 1970s. The Shah was backed by the West as a “bulwark” against communist expansion and even Moscow supported the Shah's government nearly as long as Washington did. During this time period, Iran faced inner tur-

moil due to authoritarian policies implemented by the Shah, including propaganda, censorship and the use of secret police (SAVAK), in order that he remain in power. Iranian students rose in protest against the erosion of Muslim standards, the increasing disparity in income, the vast amounts of money spent on arms and the repressive policies of the Shah's regime (Goldschmidt, 2001).

An important distinguishing characteristic in Iran from other recent pariah-state nuclear proliferators—like Iraq and North Korea—is its “quasi-democracy”—though debate over its nuclear weapons program is quite inactive. Although Iran has been pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, there is an escalating public debate over this previously taboo subject (Fahri, 2001). An anti-nuclear weapons article in *Farda*—a conservative daily newspaper in Iran—expressed the pragmatists' faction point of view:

The question is in order to declare war against which country or countries does Iran need to possess nuclear weapons? Does the deployment of nuclear weapons—if possible and of the weak kind such as those of Pakistan—bring us security or insecurity against large countries such as the U.S.? Certainly the answer is insecurity since Iran does not have the superior military technology of the U.S. and these weapons cannot even play a deterrent and security role against the U.S. On the other hand, Iran has befriended the small countries of the region and at least for now has no critical problems. Even if this was not the case, it does not need such weapons for deterrence and creating balance vis-à-vis countries like the Emirates and Iraq. Deploying such weapons not only cannot solve any problems for Iran; it will further add to its problems

(Fahri, 2001).

Public opinion has gradually diverged from the hard-line elements within the Iranian hierarchy, with 70% of the country favoring normalized relations with the United States and most supporting engagement with the international community (Chubin & Litwak, 2003).²⁵ In January 2007, Ahmadinejad's faction was expected to win city council elections easily, and also elections for the Assembly of Experts—the 86-member clerical board that selects the supreme leader. Yet the results ended in a symbolic rejection of his policies. Reformists took two-fifths of the city council seats and the conservatives who did well were not affiliated with Ahmadinejad, but with Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf—the current Tehran mayor. Perhaps most notably, Ali Rafsanjani—a conservative pragmatist distinct from the conservative ideological wing of Ahmadinejad—won a seat on the Assembly of Experts by a two to one margin. After the elections, Ahmadinejad received a signed letter by 150 of the 290 parliamentary members that criticized his handling of the economy and another group blamed his “inflammatory foreign-policy rhetoric” for the sanctions imposed on Iran by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).²⁶

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Even with a burgeoning debate over Iran's foreign policy and nuclear weapons program, Iran still lacks an academic culture and media "versed in the arcana of nuclear theology and technology," thus debates over the developments of Iran's nuclear program have remained virtually silent (Perkovich, 2003). The quest for an Iranian nuclear weapon has largely been through the contestations of factional elites and in order to promote regime development. Nuclear weapons would provide little immunity from external threats, but instead would further intensify the militarization of the domestic regime to maintain survival (Hen-Tov, 2006). The factional elites involved in Iran's nuclear quest are "a small group of strategically and technologically neophyte political insiders" who work to "acquire capabilities under cover of a civilian nuclear program." This would include the Revolutionary Guard Corps, Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamene'i, and also Iran's former conservative, but pragmatic president and current chairman of the Expediency Council, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. The Expediency Council's primary purpose and goal since the late 1980s has been the development of a nuclear program (Perkovich, 2003).

THE EFFECTS OF THE NPT AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS AS A STATUS SYMBOL

The Shah signed the NPT at its inception in 1968 and ratified it in 1970. He agreed to IAEA safeguard compliance in 1978 in exchange for "most favored nation" status granted by President Carter. Later on, several factions steadily moved away from the "taboo" nature of nuclear weapons development and, Rafsanjani in particular, called on Iran to develop a rigorous nuclear weapons program citing Iraq's use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War as an indication that the agreements and treaties were of no worth to the international community. Then recently, Ahmadinejad characterized the UNSC resolution of 2006 that bans international trading of nuclear and missile technologies with Iran as a "piece of torn paper" (Solingen, 2007).

Iran has been guilty of extensive attempts to conceal information from the IAEA and violate its NPT commitments. While the nonproliferation regime places obstacles in the path of prospective proliferators, they are not enough to ultimately prevent states from obtaining sensitive technologies clandestinely. IAEA visits in the 1980s and 1990s met with inconclusive evidence of Iran's nuclear program and Iran was consistently unable to account for secret facilities to which it has transported fissile material. The IAEA confirmed the findings of the National Council of Resistance of Iran that Iran had constructed the previously undisclosed large-scale enrichment facility at Natanz and the heavy water production site of Arak. The nonproliferation regime allows

enrichment and reprocessing, so long as the program is exposed to IAEA scrutiny. However, as the Shah demonstrated in the 1970s and Iranian leadership in the 1990s, these safeguards are not foolproof and adept rulers are able to maneuver around them (Solingen, 2007).

The NPT has proven incapable on its own to prevent Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons. While mainly focusing on ensuring Iranian compliance with its NPT commitments, there has been little attention given to the failings of the regime itself (Landau, 2006). As stated above, the NPT "is not designed to completely stop a determined state from developing a "breakout" nuclear weapons capability (Landau & Erez, 2006). This is a fundamental failure of the NPT: it incorrectly expects nonnuclear states will fail to realize that it might be in their interest to proliferate (Landau, 2006). In the case of Iran, the nonproliferation norm failed to establish legitimacy and influence its conduct to the point of either preventing the development of a nuclear weapons capability or compelling Iran to rescind once it was caught cheating. According to the recent NIE report on Iran's nuclear weapons program, Iran halted its nuclear weapons program principally in response to international pressure and after consideration of the costs associated with prolonging it. The NPT has merit, as it has contributed to shifting international norms from "prestige and legitimacy" of joining the "nuclear club" in the 1960s to joining "the club of nations adhering to the NPT" in the 1990s (Sagan, 1996), but on its own, the NPT failed to prevent Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapons capability and likewise, failed to stop it.

After the Iran-Iraq war, Iran had no enemy country towards which they would need to justify their nuclear program. A nuclear weapons capability has become more of a status symbol for the regional and international aspirations of Iran. Although, pro-nuclear voices in Iran have labeled a nuclear weapon as a deterrent and an equalizer, without a need to deter or balance against adversaries during the 1990s—due to U.N. containment of Iraq—Iran has pursued nuclear weapons development because of pride, prestige and nationalism, as demonstrated again in *Farda*:

If we give attention to the history of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War and the dominance of the bipolar system, we see that deploying nuclear weapons is not necessarily for attacking or finding enemies. Rather, given the credibility these weapons have had and continue to have at the global level, [their importance is] in the support they give to bargaining in international negotiations and advancement of the country's national interests

(Fahri, 2001).

By pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, Iran "shapes and reflects" their regional leadership and modern weaponry to the greater Middle East and also the international community. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i suggested that Iran has the capability to be '*the world leader in science*' in fifty years and a nuclear weapons program would serve to bolster

²⁶Laura Secor, "Whose Iran?" The New York Times Magazine, 28 January 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/28/magazine/28iran.t.html?_r=1&pagewanted=1&ref=magazine&oref=s.

this global perception. Also, Ahmadinejad stated that “the Iranian people—because of its past culture, its past civilization, its intelligent youth, its human and material potential—has the capacity to quickly become an invincible global power. This will happen as soon as it achieves advanced technologies” (Solingen, 2007).²⁷ Iranians want this technology—perhaps eventually for peaceful purposes—to show that their Shiite state is “advanced, developed, and strong” (Perkovich, 2005).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Because Iran faces a “real” manageable security situation without nuclear weapons, the United States must adopt a foreign policy approach that reduces what Iran “perceives” as threats to its national security. While there is no guarantee of Iran’s pursuit of nuclear energy for strictly peaceful purposes—due to its past behavior—the U.S. should treat the new NIE as an indication that Iran is not currently seeking nuclear weapons, regardless of its ongoing attempt to obtain HEU. This would call for a diplomatic offensive with the aim of giving Iran incentives to refrain from its further quest for nuclear weapons. This would include ending the U.S. economic embargo on Iran, unfreezing their assets, re-establishing full diplomatic engagement, and further spurring Iran’s inclusion in the world political and economic community by encouraging foreign investment into Iran and supporting its entry into the WTO (McFaul, Milani, & Diamond, 2006). Engagement with Iran does not imply complete trust of the current regime and the U.S. can set up observation measures to guarantee further compliance with IAEA safeguards.

The U.S. has realized its inability to “go it alone” with economic, diplomatic, and nuclear material sanctions on Iran and turned to the UNSC for support in sanctioning Iran. As the U.S. will now find it difficult to gather support for new UNSC sanctions on Iran after release of the NIE, the most effective way of unilaterally influencing Iran’s nuclear program is direct engagement with the Iranian elite, as well as influencing the increasingly discontent Iranian street (Sadjadpour, 2006). Support for the citizenry would include: business investment, education opportunities within Iran and in the U.S., democratic reform, and recognition of the impact of Islamic identity on domestic politics.

Additionally, the U.S. must discontinue support of terrorist groups within Iran, such as Mujahedin-e Khalgh (MEK), the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) and Jundallah (God’s Brigade) in order stimulate domestic support for its new policies. The U.S. must recognize the fractious politics within Iran’s government and that Ahmadinejad—in light of his caustic rhetoric concerning Israel and the West—is mostly unpopular and has little control over Iran’s nuclear

weapons program, and that more pragmatic figures, like Rafsanjani and Khamene’i, are the ones to persuade.

Through continued support of major players in the region, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iraq, the U.S. can ensure a moderately stable strategic balance in the greater Middle East. The U.S.—along with other regional players—can facilitate dialogue between Iran and Israel or other players only if it engages Iran itself. In the end, Iran will have to guarantee its own need for prestige and status by complying with IAEA safeguards, which would improve its international image and mitigate its pariah- standing. It is important to note that this can be resolved peaceably without military confrontation.

CONCLUSION

Iran’s drive to acquire a nuclear weapons capability has been influenced most heavily by its government elites and their desire to propel Iran to great power status and prestige. Iran’s perceived security requirements are very real, but the actual strategic balance in the greater Middle East does not merit the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Instead, domestic politics have had, and will likely have a stronger influence on Iran’s nuclear program. The main security dilemma Iran faced was Saddam Hussein, and the current situation in Iraq, although of concern to Iran, is minimal to the threats it faced during the Iran-Iraq war.

Many of the models introduced here can be applied to similar nuclear proliferant cases, such as Syria or to attempts by others states to attain a nuclear weapons capability, but each case is still context dependent and a thorough understanding of a nuclear weapons case requires an analysis under each framework and the realization that one theory of nuclear proliferation will not apply automatically, even though the security model tends to explain the bulk of proliferant cases.

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²⁷Solingen, Nuclear Logics, p. 169. The phrase, “the world leader in science” is borrowed from Solingen, not Ayatollah Khamene’i.

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