

A New Security Balance

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The developments in Palestine, Iraq and Iran suggest that the Middle East is undergoing a major security transformation, which will result in a new balance of power in the region that could last for over the next 50 years. With elections in Palestine due in a couple of weeks, this is an enormous opportunity to finalise the creation of an independent Palestinian state, which will add to stability in the region.

At the same time, America's lasting presence in Iraq can help ensure the region stays on a reform track that will produce net positive democratic and social transition across the wider region. The long-term effect of an overwhelming American regional presence could be the same as it was in Europe following the Second World War. Also, pacifying Syria and restoring full sovereignty to Lebanon are important components to new regional power balance.

However, in order for this new security structure to have real durability, the central axis should be a nuclear balance between Israel and Iran. This means Iran should not only develop nuclear capabilities, but also set-up an effective second response option, setting mutual assured destruction (MAD) at the centre of Israel-Iran relations.

There are several preconditions to this new order, and other sets of realities that must be kept in mind about a nuclear Iran. On the one hand, the question of nuclear deterrence is a central one. Having in the past provided for rather stable relations, nuclear deterrence prevents main protagonists from waging war against each other. For example, the United States and the USSR often came close to nuclear confrontation, but it was in fact their nuclear capabilities that made war between the two superpowers impossible, improbable and highly irrational. At the same time, it allowed for complex and balanced security systems to develop around two super powers NATO around America and the Warsaw Pact around the USSR.

The other example of relative nuclear stability is provided by India and Pakistan, whose relationship, notwithstanding a brief moment of confrontation, has been improving following the development of nuclear capabilities.

Freezing competition

The fact is where there are two competing powers with the ambition and potential to exert their power across the region, confrontation and regional instability are the natural outcome. Such, it could be argued, is the case today between Israel and Iran. One option for stabilising and freezing competition between the two protagonists is by striving for a nuclear balance.

Many political pundits and leaders in the region and in the west worry that a nuclear Iran is dangerous because the regime in Tehran would be irresponsible with its weapons. The contrary is in fact true. A nuclear Iran would be a more secure Iran, and thus the regime in

Tehran a more responsible one. Becoming a nuclear power is not only a question of developing a bomb. It is primarily a question of a nation's willingness to wield power, and to do so responsibly.

In a nuclear balanced environment, every “mistake” risks being punished by a nuclear counter-attack. In other words, Iran with a bomb cannot afford to make mistakes on the magnitude of shifting nuclear technology and know-how to terrorist groups, or using its nuclear power irresponsibly. The likelihood of an Israeli nuclear response is too great.

Second, nuclear balance and MAD should prove sufficient insurance that Iran and Israel remain committed to the no first-use nuclear posture. At the same time, nuclear power will give the two countries that much more reason to engage in enhanced dialogue and participation in confidence building measures. Once achieving power parity, Israel and Iran will also have a mutual interest in ensuring general regional stability.

Again, the lessons from the U.S.-USSR nuclear balance are instructive. Cooperation and dialogue between the two genuinely developed only after there was a perception of nuclear parity. This also locked the two superpowers in a dialogue on how to responsibly and jointly ensure relative global stability. Today, the U.S. and Russia are strategic partners with programmes underway that are aimed at reducing nuclear power.

Finally, a medium-term nuclear Iran can help speed-up the process of transforming the Middle East into a nuclear free zone. If locked into a stable relationship with Iran, and surrounded by a transparent regional security infrastructure, Israel could be convinced into signing a mutual weapons-reduction programme with Iran.

In this context, a nuclear Iran carries an overall net positive security value for the Middle East, which will be better off with Iran and Israel locked in a stable nuclear relationship.

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