

Facing Iran on its Own

In core matters of war and peace, timing is everything. For Israel, now cheerlessly confirmed in its long-held view that U.S.-led diplomacy with Iran was misconceived, future strategic options should be determined with great care. In essence, this means that the beleaguered mini-state's nuclear policies, going forward, should be extrapolated from carefully fashioned *doctrine*, and not assembled, *ad hoc*, or "on the fly," in assorted and more-or-less discrete reactions to periodic crises.

More precisely, should Israel decide to decline any residual preemption options, and prepare instead for aptly reliable and protracted dissuasion of its nearly-nuclear Iranian adversary, several corresponding decisions would be necessary. These closely-intersecting judgments would concern a still-expanding role for multilayered ballistic missile defense,[\[2\]](#)

In this connection, among other things, Jerusalem will need to convince Tehran that Israel's nuclear forces are (1) substantially secure from all enemy first-strike attacks,[\[4\]](#)

To succeed with any policy of long-term deterrence, a nearly-nuclear Iran would first need to be convinced that Israel's nuclear weapons were actually *usable*. In turn, this complex task of strategic persuasion would require some consciously nuanced efforts to remove "the bomb" from Israel's "basement." One specific reason for undertaking any such conspicuous removal would be to assure Iranian decision-makers that Israeli nuclear weapons were not only abundantly "real," but also amenable to variable situational calibrations.

The strategic rationale of such assurance would be to convince Iran that Israel stands ready to confront widely-different degrees of plausible enemy threat.

In the "good old days" of the original U.S.-U.S.S.R. Cold

War (we may now be on the brink of "Cold War II"), such tangibly measured strategic calculations had been granted their own specific name. Then, the proper term was "escalation dominance." Early on, therefore, it had been understood, by both superpowers, that adequate security from nuclear attack must always include not only mutually-reinforcing or "synergistic" protections against "bolt-from-the-blue" missile attacks, but also the avoidance of unwitting or uncontrolled escalations. Such unpredictably rapid jumps in coercive intensity, it had already been noted, could too-quickly propel certain determined adversaries from "normally" conventional engagements to atomic war.

Occasionally, especially in many-sided strategic calculations, truth can be counter-intuitive. On this point, regarding needed Israeli preparations for safety from a nearly-nuclear Iran, [\[6\]](#) and contemplating "counter-value versus counterforce" targeting issues, would opt for some sort or other of "mixed" strategy. In any event, whichever nuclear deterrence strategy Israel might actually decide to choose, what would only matter is what Iran itself would *perceive* as real. Always, in matters of nuclear strategy, the only decisional reality is *perceived* reality.

In choosing between two core nuclear targeting alternatives, Israel could decide to opt for nuclear deterrence based primarily upon *assured destruction* strategies. Reciprocally, however, looking at the negative consequences column, Jerusalem could thereby invite an enlarged risk of "losing" any nuclear war that might sometime arise. For the most part, this is true because counter-value-targeted nuclear weapons are not designed to efficiently destroy military targets.

If, on the other hand, Israel were to opt for nuclear deterrence based primarily upon counterforce capabilities, Iran could then feel especially threatened, a potentially precarious condition that could subsequently heighten the prospect of an enemy first-strike, and thereby, of an eventual

nuclear exchange.

In these particular matters, assorted “intervening variables” must also be considered. Israel’s strategic decisions on counter-value versus counterforce doctrines should depend, at least in part, on certain prior investigations of: (1) enemy state inclinations to strike first; and (2) enemy state inclinations to strike all-at-once, or in stages.

Should Israeli strategic planners assume that an already-nuclear Iran is apt to strike first, and to strike in an unlimited fashion (that is, to fire all or most of its nuclear weapons, right away), Israeli counterforce-targeted warheads, used in retaliation, could hit only empty silos/launchers. Anticipating such manifestly unfavorable circumstances, Israel’s only reasonable application of counterforce doctrine would then be to strike first itself.

Nonetheless, any idea of an Israeli *nuclear* preemption, even if technically “rational” and legal, would likely be dismissed out-of-hand in Jerusalem.

Concerning specific jurisprudential issues of *law* and nuclear weapons use, the U.N.’s International Court of Justice, in a landmark 1996 *Advisory Opinion*, ruled that nuclear weapons could sometimes be used permissibly, but only in those largely residual circumstances where the “very survival of a state would be at stake.”

If, as now seems most likely, Israel were to reject all conceivable preemption options, there would be no compelling reason for Jerusalem to opt for a *counterforce* strategy vis-à-vis Iran. Rather, from the discernibly critical standpoint of persuasive intra-war deterrence, a *counter-value* strategy would likely prove more appropriate.

With this in mind, *The Project Daniel Group*, in 2004, had urged Israel to “focus its (second-strike) resources on counter-value warheads...”[\[8\]](#) The overriding purpose of

Israel's nuclear forces, whether still ambiguous, or newly disclosed, must consistently be deterrence, not any actual military engagement. In principle, of course, nuclear war-fighting scenarios are not *ipso facto* out-of-the-question, but they should always be rejected by Israel where still possible.

Si vis pacem, para bellum atomicum. "If you want peace, prepare for atomic war."

In the still-valid counsel of *Project Daniel*: "The primary point of Israel's nuclear forces must always be deterrence *ex ante*, not revenge *ex post*." Or, conceptualized in the historically antecedent language of Sun-Tzu, the ancient Chinese military thinker, Israel should be guided by the following sound maxim: "Subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is always the true pinnacle of excellence." [\[10\]](#)

Second, Iranian leaders could sometime *be irrational*, but this would not mean that they were also mad or "crazy." Rather, in all pertinent matters, an irrational national decision is "merely" one which does not place the very highest value upon national survival. For a relevant example, Iranian decision-makers could sometime choose to act upon a preference-ordering that values destruction of the Jewish State and the corollary fulfillment of presumed religious expectations more highly than the Shiite republic's physical existence.

In principle, at least, faced with just such an irrational adversary, Israel might still manage to forge a successful plan for deterrence. Here, however, Jerusalem would first need to base its discernibly calculable threats upon those particular and identifiable religious institutions or infrastructures held most sacred in Tehran.

When the ancient Greek leader, Pericles, delivered his famous *Funeral Oration*, with its ritualistic praise of Athenian civilization – a speech we know today by way of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* – his perspective was openly

strategic. Long before military calculations had ever needed to include nuclear weapons, and about a half-century after the Persian (Iranian) defeat of Greece at Thermopylae by Xerxes, Pericles had already understood the vital connections between enemy power and self-inflicted error. "What I fear more than the strategies of our enemies," Pericles had presciently warned, "is our own mistakes."

There is a important lesson here for Israel: *Looking beyond the just-completed nuclear agreement with Iran, do not forget that the cumulative harms ensuing from this significant diplomatic failure will ultimately depend upon Israel's own selected responses.*[\[12\]](#) and appropriately flexible strategic doctrine.

Sources:

[\[2\]](#) See, on such discontinuance: Louis René Beres, "Like Two Scorpions in a Bottle: Could Israel and a Nuclear Iran Coexist in the Middle East," *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8., No. 1, 2014, pp. 23-32; Louis René Beres, "Facing Myriad Enemies: Core Elements of Israeli Nuclear Deterrence," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. XX, Issue 1., Fall/Winter 2013, pp. 17-30; Louis René Beres, "Lessons for Israel from Ancient Chinese Military Thought: Facing Iranian Nuclearization with Sun-Tzu," *Harvard National Security Journal*, Harvard Law School, 2013; Louis René Beres, "Striking Hezbollah-Bound Weapons in Syria: Israel's Actions Under International Law," *Harvard National Security Journal*, 2013; and Louis René Beres, "Looking Ahead: Revising Israel's Nuclear Ambiguity in the Middle East," Herzliya Conference, 2013, March 2013; IDC/Herzliya.

[\[4\]](#) See Professor Beres and Admiral Edney, "What Now For Israel: What are the Jewish State's security options after the Iran Nuclear Agreement?", *US News & World Report*, July 14, 2015.

[\[6\]](#) See Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*.

[\[8\]](#) Herman Kahn's instructive comment many years back stipulates: "It is incorrect and unproductive to categorically accuse those who subscribe to war-fighting concepts either of wanting to fight a nuclear war, or of having less interest in deterrence." See Kahn, *Thinking About the Unthinkable in the 1980s*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1984, p. 43.

[\[10\]](#) For pertinent law, see: *Resolution on the Definition of Aggression*, Dec. 14, 1974, U.N.G.A. Res. 3314 (XXIX), 29 U.N. GAOR, Supp. (No. 31) 142, and U.N. Doc. A/9631, 1975, reprinted in 13 I.L.M. 710, 1974; and *Charter of the United Nations*, Art. 51., Done at San Francisco, June 26, 1945. Entered into force, for the United States, Oct. 24, 1945, 59 Stat., 1031, T.S. No. 993, Bevans, 1153, 1976, and Y.B.U.N. 1043.

[\[12\]](#) "Theories are nets," said the German poet, Novalis, "and only those who cast, will catch."

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