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Without Deterrence, America Can't Confront Nuclear Mavericks

Not every callout of a belligerent rival is a step toward war.

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To effectively counter the nuclear ambitions of determined proliferators, a strategy of compellence is essential, even if it takes place within the framework of diplomacy and negotiations. Determined nuclear proliferators are very determined: they are bent on attaining the strategic value they attribute to a nuclear weapons capability, and are loath to give up the pursuit. There is no win-win solution—either they will achieve the capability or will be compelled to give it up. North Korea and Iran secretly pursued nuclear-weapons capabilities in violation of their NPT commitments, and they are both aggressive regional actors, with a record of threatening their neighbors, including existentially. Their behavior elicits fears that the nuclear capabilities they seek are for offensive (power accumulation) purposes, rather than as a means to buttress a defensive foreign policy to ensure their own security and survival. And they will not give up the capabilities unless the cost is extremely high.

When leading international actors chose diplomacy as the strategy by which to compel both Iran and North Korea to reverse course in the nuclear realm, they forgot that it was an exercise in compellence, and instead embraced the "give and take" norm that does apply to many negotiations. But not to these negotiations. While it was only pressure that got these two proliferators to the table in the first place, in both cases the negotiators did not follow through with their pressure tactics in the negotiation itself. The respective deals—for North Korea in 1994 and Iran in 2015—were partial at best, and did not reflect a strategic about-face in the nuclear realm for either proliferator. Both Iran and North Korea continue to harbor nuclear ambitions post-deal as well.

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