

The House is on Fire: NATO's Regional Security Dialogue and Iran's Power Projection

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NATO currently has two identities; it is a security alliance in the traditional sense and a “partnership for peace.” These two identities rest on radically different security mechanisms and practices. NATO's security alliance is based on traditional defense multilateralism, or more precisely, on balance of power mechanisms and practices such as deterrence, coercive diplomacy, coercion, and intervention. As a partnership for peace, NATO uses community-building multilateral mechanisms and practices not only with prospective new members, but also works to promote stability and peace with its near-abroad partners. The main idea is winning hearts and minds via partnerships, dialogue, seminar diplomacy, public diplomacy, and socialization, and more broadly, “cooperative security.” NATO shows that balance of power and security community practices not only may not be mutually exclusive, but may actually complement each other with the goal of securing the West and stabilizing the regions with which NATO interacts.

The Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) is a clear example of NATO as a partnership for peace; its community-building multilateralism aims at building common meanings via common practices, “teaching” liberal values and their relation to military power, and creating links between fellow practitioners. Why does NATO do this? In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation in Western military circles about

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the strategic value of winning hearts and minds of adversaries and potential partners, and of enhancing security by means of sharing common practices and building regional identities.

Learning together how to cooperate is highly positive as long as dialogue takes place within a relatively stable context and there is time for reaching the shared interests that the dialogue attempts to cultivate. But when the situation is very unstable and time is at a premium, dialogue alone will not do. Think of two musicians sharing a house who are trying unsuccessfully to make good music together until a neighbor comes to their aid and teaches them how to tune and harmonize their instruments. Now, however, imagine the house is on fire. The Mediterranean Dialogue is currently taking place while “the house is on fire” and there are no signs that the fire will be extinguished soon. I use this metaphor, first because of Iran’s power projection and drive to obtain nuclear weapons quickly, along with Israel’s determination to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities if Iran cannot be prevented by other means from attaining nuclear weapons. Second, there is a dangerous and highly volatile combination of changes in the nature of warfare – with an emphasis on asymmetrical warfare and the availability of missiles that can reach and create havoc in population centers – and ideologically motivated individuals, groups, and states that may not respond to traditional cost-benefit calculations and may thus use lethal weapons with impunity. This combination threatens not only states’ physical existence, but also their leaders’ sense of stability and predictability.

Finally, despite appearances to the contrary, the two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whose parameters are well understood in the region and around the world, is being undermined by two “races” that are now reaching a critical point. The first race is between Israel’s unspoken strategy of what Zvi Bar’el from *Haaretz* called “negotiations forever,” that is, keep negotiating with the Arabs as long as it takes, without being able, wanting, or both to concede assets that Israel takes as critical for its physical security, identity, and domestic stability, and Iran’s unspoken strategy of “attrition until implosion,” namely, making life so miserable for Israelis until they leave. From the Iranian perspective, a combination of demography, attrition from constant asymmetrical warfare, the threat of nuclear devastation, and

hostile world public opinion will put an end to Israel as a Jewish state. The second race is about whether Israel or the Palestinians succeed in having the other succumb to a civil war first. When Israel says to the Palestinian Authority “control or eliminate Hamas,” it actually means “you have the civil war first.” When Palestinians say to Israel “get rid of the settlements,” they actually mean “it is you who should have the civil war first.”

The Mediterranean Dialogue has been positive so far and will continue to promote cooperation, yet only if the factors that fuel the “fire” are addressed. This does not mean that practices of dialogue, socialization, and cooperative security pioneered by NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Union will become inconsequential; they are crucial. When the house is on fire, however, the time comes for multilateral organizations to take bold steps. These should combine, on the one hand, alliance, balance of power, and deterrence practices, and on the other hand, innovative practices aimed at winning the hearts and minds of opponents and public opinion alike. In fact, an overlap between classic military security practices is not a new phenomenon, for example, as in Southeast Asia. Even a security community such as the EU is characterized by overlap between traditional defense multilateral practices associated with a security alliance, and security community practices associated with NATO as a partnership for peace.

In the Middle East, however, the current overlap will not suffice; new and bolder measures will be needed. This means, *inter alia*, changing the way we think about hard and soft power. Soft security measures can help achieve hard security goals: for example, dialogues may prevent nuclear war by helping build common knowledge, which is nonexistent between Israel and Iran; and hard security measures can serve soft security goals: for example, alliance expansion and extended deterrence may help reassure and thus open options other than the use of force.

At the present critical juncture, multilateral organizations must take bold steps that combine, on the one hand, alliance, balance of power, and deterrence practices, and on the other hand, innovative practices aimed at winning the hearts and minds of opponents and public opinion alike.

One of the reasons that new and bolder measures are warranted is that Israel is in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” dilemma or social trap, a lose-lose situation, whereby it has only two bad options, to attack or not to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities. If Israel attacks, Iran will profit tremendously from it: damned if you do. But if Israel holds back, it loses: damned if you don’t.

There is still a narrow possibility that Iran will be dissuaded from attaining nuclear weapons via diplomacy, sanctions, or both, or that Iran’s internal regime will change for the better. Unfortunately, these two options seem hardly likely. In order to prevail, diplomacy, including coercive diplomacy, will require structural changes in the Middle East without which Iran has no incentive to change its nuclear weapons course. As to domestic change, because Iranians attach so much self-worth, identity, and prestige to their nuclear project, foreign pressure to overthrow their current government will only result in rallying the majority of Iranians around the flag, even those disenchanted with the current regime.

So much has been said about what would happen if Iran develops nuclear weapons undisturbed, or alternatively, if Israel attacks Iran’s nuclear facilities, that there is no need to dwell on it except perhaps to say that attacking Iran will most likely substantially enhance Iran’s strategy of “attrition until implosion.” I thus share former Mossad director Efraim Halevy’s comment to *Newsweek* of a few months ago, that if Israel were to attack Iran, the problem will be less the immediate reprisal than the next hundred years. In other words, from the perspective of Iran’s strategy of “attrition until implosion,” if Israel attacks Iran, Israel will live on borrowed time.

Allowing Iran to develop nuclear weapons undisturbed, however, will also, perhaps even more, enhance a strategy of “attrition of Israel until implosion.” Actually, this is Iran’s goal and Ahmadinejad has stated it explicitly. It is, therefore, damned if you do, damned if you don’t; Iran wins-wins, Israel loses-loses, and the flames of the fire grow higher and higher.

Thus for the sake of stability; of continuing the dialogue between Arabs and Israelis, which the MD contributes to; of trying to achieve a quick just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and most urgently, of preventing nuclear war, global jihad, or both, it is imperative to think

outside the box. Thinking outside the box requires drastically changing the current structure in the Middle East, so that “the fire” can be put out. Rather than either using force or relying on deterrence based on Cold War assumptions, what is needed is a strategy of *defusing*, which can prevent Iran from attaining a huge strategic advantage of being the victim of an attack by Israel, and at the same time, changing the rules of the game in the Middle East so drastically that Iran’s expectations, power projection policies, and “attrition until implosion” strategy would require revision. Defusing may be accomplished by *denial*, which means preventing states from dragging other states into using force against them when it is irrational to do so, and *restructuration*, which means drastically transforming the structure and rules of the situation.

Examples of “defusing by denial” include:

1. Not falling for rhetorical and military provocations because this is exactly what Iran’s allies, such as Hizbollah, want.
2. Raising the level of violence threshold that elicits the use of force.
3. Changing military thinking and doctrine that “saving deterrence” requires the use of force. In fact, using force to save deterrence usually diminishes deterrence, especially when states such as Israel are provoked to respond with force.
4. Changing the popular conception that using force is always the patriotic course to take, and that survival threats must always be faced with the use of force and cannot be defused. The Cuban missile crisis was a successful use of a defusing strategy.
5. Avoiding humiliation of the enemy to the point that emotions become the driving force of strategic decisions; “targeting” the opponent’s dignity and respect makes it less sensitive to cost and thus more difficult to deter. Defusing strategies that take dignity and respect into consideration make the opponent more sensitive to costs and more amenable to trust promises.

One role NATO can play in helping defuse by denial is to deny opponents, in particular Iran’s allies such as Hizbollah, from succeeding in provoking Israel to retaliate. In other words, NATO should deploy defusing rather than peacekeeping forces; the latter would be used to deny opportunities for provocations, rather than to keep a nonexistent peace.

The most important strategy, however, is defusing by restructuring the rules of the game in the Middle East and doing so quickly, with much drama and high-profile mobilization of the international community, including NATO. Restructuring the Middle East entails a colossal quid pro quo. First, it will be imperative to make Israel a full member of NATO speedily, though neither as a military strategy of expanding NATO's alliance to the Middle East nor as a strategy of anchoring Israel within Europe. Rather, the sole purpose, at least at first, will be defusing nuclear war and/or global jihad. This means using hard security measures with the goal of gaining hearts and minds, in this case, the Israelis. Placing Israel under NATO's nuclear umbrella not only would go a long way toward deterring Iran from threatening or attacking Israel with nuclear weapons, but also would dampen existential fears in Israel. Israelis may warm to this idea if they understand that the price of retaining the occupied territories is jihad against Israel, or worse, nuclear war. But will NATO, in particular its European members, accept Israel? The answer is that if diplomacy and non-violent regime change will not work and the remaining alternatives

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are global jihad or nuclear war, then throwing into the positive side of the equation a formal resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the creation of a viable Palestinian state might go a long way in changing minds in NATO headquarters as well as in European and North American capitals. NATO would need to give up its policy of balanced partnership between Israel and Arab countries. Arab countries, on the other hand, will gain from the other side of the quid pro quo.

Second, it would be incumbent on Israel to attempt to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict quickly, more or less along the lines of what may already be called Obama's four point plan, i.e., a two-state solution with a viable Palestinian state

(a retreat of Israel to the '67 borders), compensation to Palestinians refugees, Jerusalem as home to two capitals, and a demilitarized Palestinian state. Also included would be a peace treaty between Syria

and Israel that would entail the return of the Golan Heights to Syria and a Syrian commitment to maintain the stability of the new Middle East order.

With Israel embedded in NATO, NATO would then begin engaging Iran diplomatically in order to attain “common knowledge,” without which not only is deterrence impossible, but also an unintended nuclear war becomes a real possibility. The biggest threat to Israel from Iranian nuclear weapons is less a premeditated nuclear attack on Israel, Iran’s use of the mere possession of nuclear weapons to destabilize Israel and the region, and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, than the lack of common knowledge, namely, that “you know that I know that you know.” Lack of common knowledge can inexorably lead to unintended nuclear war. When at the height of the Cuban missile crisis Anatoly Dobrynin and Robert Kennedy held talks at the White House about how to defuse the crisis, they disagreed about almost everything. But their bargaining took place within the same horizon of expectations, while holding shared meanings not only about rationality but also about what fairness is, and where rationality and fairness meet.

NATO would subsequently adapt, expand, apply, and deploy the techniques, institutions, and practices of cooperative security that it developed in the 1990s, in order to lay the foundations for a regional security regime. This regime will need to reflect power realities and deal with Iran’s security concerns and ambitions, mainly in the Gulf. But it also will entail the beginning of arms control and confidence building and dialogue for the sake of achieving hard security goals, such as preventing nuclear war. If in one or two generations the Middle East structure will improve and the security regime will be in place, then, and only then, should a serious international political process begin of creating a nuclear free zone in the Middle East, including Israel, which by then would be firmly anchored within NATO.

This proposal sounds extremely naive only when considered in the absence of its two alternatives. Just imagine a Middle East in which the defusing strategy is successful. Now compare this image to regional Middle East scenarios, first, after an Israeli attack on Iran, and second, if Iran develops nuclear weapons undisturbed. Then ask yourselves, again, whether defusing is idealistic, or whether it is the only realistic strategy, if we want to prevent nuclear war and global jihad,

disempower radical forces with lethal weapons, and make sure that a Jewish democratic state lives on, not only in the present generation, but also in future generations.