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Welcome Iran and North Korea to the Nuclear Club: You're Targeted

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In one of the great ironies of the post-Cold War era, the United States, the most powerful nuclear state in the world, seems fear stricken by the possibility of Iran and North Korea obtaining nuclear weapons. Two facts frame the dilemma: both states are intent on becoming nuclear powers, and neither the European Union (EU) nor China is willing to help curb their ambitions. Clearly, nonproliferation is an important policy goal, but the United States should not view leakage as a catastrophe. Rather, the proper response is a declaratory policy of nuclear deterrence directed specifically at Iran and North Korea once they become nuclear powers.

As scholars and practitioners long have affirmed, the essence of nuclear deterrence is the certitude that an attack with nuclear weapons will result in a retaliatory strike of assured destruction. The idea is to make the consequences so severe that the nuclear option is never contemplated. U.S. nuclear credibility rests on both the capability and the national will to retaliate with nuclear weapons. The U.S. administration will underscore the nation's resolve by declaring a commitment of automatic nuclear retaliation against Iran or North Korea if they attack the United States, its allies, or signatories of the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) *with nuclear weapons*. The paradox of nuclear deterrence is that the more credible the threat to retaliate, the less likely the threat will be tested. Conversely, any initiative that lowers the credibility of nuclear retaliation (e.g., ballistic missile defense, retaliation with precision guided conventional munitions, or inclusion of chemical and biological weapons in this category for retaliation) increases the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used. In short, if Iran or North Korea perceives the U.S. threat to retaliate with nuclear weapons is not credible, the greater the likelihood they will misjudge during a crisis.

But is directed nuclear deterrence unnecessarily provocative? The response is simply that the past conduct of both Iran and North Korea counts, which is why they are singled out from the rest of the nuclear club. Both have clashed with the United States in the past and actively foment anti-American behavior. They are adversaries of the United States and should be treated as such. If they do not wish to be targeted, then they can give up their nuclear weapon ambitions.

The pressing fear is of Iran or North Korea providing nuclear devices to terrorist proxies to attack the United States. The United States must make clear that it views terrorist organizations as merely another delivery device, no different from a nuclear bomb delivered by an aircraft or ballistic missile. Should a terrorist organization detonate a nuclear device or dirty bomb in the United States or allies, a nuclear retaliation for *both* will be assured. Admittedly, such a nuclear retaliation against Iran

and North Korea seems rash because their involvement will not likely be ascertained. Philosophers can debate the ethics of nuclear retaliation resulting from a nonattributive nuclear attack all they want, but Iran and North Korea must face the hard consequences of their reckless behavior. Under such conditions, they have strong incentives to practice nonproliferation as well as quietly informing the United States of any terrorist plots to use nuclear devices.

U.S. extended deterrence to regional allies and friends strengthens nonproliferation because they will not feel compelled to increase their security with their own nuclear arsenals. The coupling of nuclear warheads on mobile ballistic missiles deserves special attention because they permit a quick strike. Because the likelihood of an accidental or unauthorized launch is much higher with mobile ballistic missiles, the United States should urge Iran and North Korea to store warheads and missiles separately. If the United States cannot persuade them to take such positive control measures, it must announce the local stationing of nuclear submarines armed with ballistic missiles (SLBM) for immediate retaliation.

Contrary to likely assertions that a directed U.S. nuclear deterrence would undermine negotiations with Iran and North Korea regarding their nuclear programs, the U.S. policy actually would do more to convince them that the disadvantages of a nuclear arsenal far outweigh their intended benefits. Aside from highlighting the attendant expenses (safety measures, safe weapon designs, positive control requirements, testing, maintenance, and security measures), and the associated risks (accidents or loss of control), negotiations must accentuate that their inclusion on the U.S. nuclear targeting plan places them in a special category--one that actually diminishes their overall security posture. Assuming that Iranian and North Korean leaders are rational actors, their own political survival is of paramount concern. Lastly, effective coercion requires assurances to reinforce stable behavior. Assuming that Iran and North Korea are pursuing nuclear weapons to prevent a potential U.S. invasion, a nonaggression treaty would provide the assurance that a nuclear arsenal is unnecessary.

Naturally, a shift in U.S. nuclear deterrent policy must be declared in a series of speeches and articles. Not only will it stir a debate among scholars and practitioners, but it will also serve notice to Iran and North Korea that, as nuclear powers, they will enter a high stakes security realm for which they are wholly unprepared. Thus far, the United States has eschewed broaching this issue publicly, but Iran and North Korea's accelerated nuclear programs demand greater urgency. If the United States fails to address the problem soon, one of its allies may take matters into its own hands.