

A 'Leap of Trust'? Overcoming the Distrust in US-Iranian  
Nuclear Relations

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I would like to begin by thanking the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy and the British Pugwash Group for inviting me to speak. It is a great pleasure to have this opportunity to present before such a distinguished audience.

My paper seeks to contribute to the challenge of building a WMD free-zone in the Middle East by exploring the potential for building trust between the United States and Iran in relation to the nuclear issue. It develops out of a wider research project on the potential for international nuclear trust-building in different regions that I am leading at Aberystwyth University.

The paper is organised as follows: first, I will discuss the ‘stick and carrot’ approach that has shaped US policy and that of its Western partners towards the threat posed by Iran’s nuclear programme. This has been underpinned by a model of trust-building where the burden of building trust between Washington and Tehran has been placed solely at Tehran’s door. I will then discuss two alternative approaches to trust-building that might open up new possibilities for peacefully resolving the nuclear issue. These are firstly the idea of building trust step-by-step, and secondly, the more ambitious idea of what I call a ‘leap of trust.’ I will argue that the

key concept in opening the door to these possibilities is recognition of the importance of the concept of the security dilemma.

Let's start with the model of trust-building that has guided past Western policy. It depends upon actor A – the truster – who makes a judgement as to whether to trust actor B - the trustee. The truster places the burden of establishing a trust relationship on the trustee – the trustee has to prove their trustworthiness.

I would argue that this approach has shaped the policy of the United States and its Western allies towards Iran since it was discovered in August 2002 that Iran was in breach of its safeguards obligations under the NPT. What fuels the distrust of Tehran's motives in relation to its nuclear programme is that if the programme is purely peaceful as Iran has claimed, why has it failed to satisfy the IAEA's concerns, especially those relating to its past weaponisation activities? Most recently of course, the revelation that Iran has been building a new enrichment plant at Qom has deepened suspicions that Tehran does not have peaceful nuclear motives and intentions.

To prevent Iran from controlling the complete nuclear fuel-cycle which is crucial to building a bomb, Washington and its allies have adopted since

2002 a policy of zero-enrichment. To induce Iran to accept this, the E3+3 have tried a combination of sticks and carrots.

The verdict up until last week's possible breakthrough in Geneva would have been that on the one hand the sticks in the form of the existing sanctions have not hurt enough, whilst on the other hand, the carrots in the form of the promised political, economic and security benefits have not been sufficiently appetising to induce Iran to suspend its enrichment activities, or even freeze them.

However, Iran's reported offer at last week's negotiations to ship a large amount of the low enriched uranium at Natanz to Russia for enrichment into fuel-rods for its small research reactor that produces medical isotopes is potentially an important conciliatory move, as is the promise to open up the facility at Qom to IAEA inspectors.

Those who have argued that the threat of increased sanctions would lead to a change in Iran's negotiating position will feel vindicated by last week's Iranian move. However, even if it is the case that Tehran has made this move out of fear of tougher sanctions and/or the increasing threat of military action by Israel, it is important to consider what factors have

been driving the Islamic Republic's determination to achieve mastery of the nuclear fuel-cycle.

I am going to leave aside the motivation which is Iran's sole public justification for its nuclear programme, namely, that it is exercising its inherent right under Article IV of the NPT to develop civil nuclear capabilities for domestic energy use. This is an important factor motivating Iran's actions, but I want to focus on two other explanations.

The first is that the Iranian leadership has decided not only to acquire the fuel-cycle, but also the weapon itself! Moreover, some of those who make this claim follow it up with the proposition that Iran's motivation in doing this is to acquire a capability that can be employed to support a foreign policy that rejects the goal of normalisation with the West and which is aimed at advancing the Islamic revolution in the region. On this interpretation of Tehran's motives and intentions, there is no space for trust-building policies; instead, the only viable option to remove the nuclear danger is containment, and perhaps ultimately regime change.

However, an alternative interpretation and one that does not close the door on trust-building is that Iran is determined to acquire mastery of the fuel-cycle because it wants a hedge against potential nuclear adversaries.

One adversary looms large here, prompting the question whether Iran's determination to have a nuclear insurance policy is driven principally by fear and distrust of the United States.

I would argue that consideration should be given in both Western and Iranian policy-making to the possibility that the United States and Iran are trapped in the dynamics of distrust that are generated by the security dilemma.

The British historian, Herbert Butterfield, was the first to capture how the psychological workings of the security dilemma could lead to spiralling distrust between two states with peaceful/defensive intentions. Butterfield encapsulated the security dilemma problem in international politics in the following passage. Diplomats, he wrote, 'may vividly feel the terrible fear that [they] have of the other party, but [they] cannot enter into the [others] counter-fear, or even understand why [they] should be particularly nervous'. He went on to say that it is 'never possible for you to realise or remember properly that since [the other] cannot see the inside of your mind, [they] can never have the same assurance of your intentions that you have.' From the security dilemma perspective, the challenge for the United States and Iran is to find ways of reassuring each other – what Butterfield called entering into the other's counter-fear'.

However, even if leaders are able to put themselves in the shoes of actual or potential adversaries, there is the question of how to translate such individual-level empathy into state policies that might build trust. I want to suggest two ideas here. First, the idea of a graduated approach to trust-building where trust is built step-by-step, and secondly, the idea of what I call a 'leap of trust.'

The graduated approach to trust-building suggests that governments can signal their peaceful/defensive intentions to an opponent by making limited moves, whilst at the same time not exposing themselves to a high level of risk if the other turns out to have aggressive intentions.

This is one interpretation of what the Obama Administration has been doing in its overtures towards Iran. US officials have expressed disappointment over the last few months that Tehran has not reciprocated these symbolic gestures. One plausible explanation for this lack of reciprocity is that the Iranian leadership is operating with what Ole Holsti called 'an inherent bad faith model.' This mindset interprets any concessions that are made by an adversary as a trick that is designed to lull one into a false sense of security which can then be ruthlessly exploited.

Bad faith thinking of this kind might explain why Iran – despite its protestations to the contrary - would want to build undeclared facilities, keeping the option open of a parallel but covert fuel-cycle. It also suggests the importance of the olive branch that was perhaps extended by Iran in Geneva last week since bad faith thinking leads to the view that any concessions by one's own side will be interpreted as a sign of weakness, thereby encouraging further demands.

In this light, and given the internal power plays in Tehran, it is important that the West is not seen to have pocketed what might be viewed in Iran as an important confidence-building move. Given the deep distrust and fear between the United States and Iran, the question becomes whether something more is needed than the step-by-step approach to trust-building, especially if Tehran is operating with an inherent bad faith model. An alternative approach to step-by-step and one that might have some potential in resolving the nuclear stand-off is what I call a 'leap of trust.'

Leaps of trust are frame-breaking conciliatory moves that are taken to decisively signal a state's trustworthiness. A text-book example of a leap was the courageous decision in 1977 by President Anwar Sadat of Egypt to fly to Jerusalem, and in a speech before the Knesset, publicly recognize



the right of Israel to exist. In the case of Sadat, Israeli policy-makers did not really believe he was going to come until he boarded the plane in Cairo. Sadat knew of these doubts and this is why he viewed it as so important to break the psychology of fear and distrust. Sadat's visit made possible the US brokered Camp David peace process which led to a spectacular breakthrough in Egypt-Israeli relations which has endured to this day.

We might have different ideas as what such a leap would look like in the US-Iranian nuclear context. But let me suggest one possibility which is the idea of the E3+3 proposing to the Iranian Government that a multinational consortium be formed to enrich uranium on Iranian soil?

Sir John Thomson and Geoff Forden have been the most prominent exponents of this idea. They claim that a consortium of this kind is the best approach to increasing the political and technological barriers to a covert Iranian nuclear-weapons capability. Nevertheless, as others like Mark Fitzpatrick have pointed out, if Iran decided to incur the high political costs of openly breaking out of the NPT and as part of this forcibly seized the multinational facility, this would increase the speed at which Iran could develop a nuclear-weapon.

A leap of trust requires leaders who are psychologically prepared to risk the costs of misplaced trust if it turns out that their interpretation of an adversary's behaviour as motivated by fear and not aggression turns out to be wrong. This raises the crucial question of whether such leaps should be furnished with a safety-net, recognising that some levels of vulnerability will simply be too great for decision-makers to risk a strategy of trust.

## **Conclusion**

Obama's policy of engagement made possible last week's first official meeting between the two countries in three decades. This meeting has opened the door to new possibilities; Iran has perhaps made an important confidence-building move that if followed through could significantly reduce anxieties about its breakout capability.

However, it might be argued that this apparent conciliatory move has only come about because of the disclosures about the second facility, and that it is aimed at heading off the threat of sanctions and drawing out talks whilst the centrifuges continue to spin. On this reading, trust-building is a futile and dangerous endeavour because the Iranian Government is not interested in a normalised relationship with the United States.

Set against this, it is important to remember the significance of the security dilemma idea and the possibility that others are acting out of fear and not malevolence. In this regard, it is important to remember that there have been openings such as after 9/11 when the Iranian leadership sought a normalised relationship. This was a missed opportunity and it is important not to miss any future ones, and to work to create such spaces through imaginative policies that can build trust.

The challenge with regard to the nuclear issue is to reach an agreement on the nuclear issue that can meet two conflicting goals: first, it has to reassure Iranian decision-makers that if they roll back their nuclear-weapons capability they will not make themselves more vulnerable to attack; and second, any residual Iranian nuclear programme has to be sufficiently constrained so that it reassures other governments that Iran is not developing a bomb under the guise of a peaceful programme.

But a compromise that recognises Iranian nuclear latency in return for high levels of transparency can only be reached if the psychology of distrust can be broken down. What is needed here is for one side to make a conciliatory frame-breaking move – or a leap of trust. There are good reasons for being cautious about proposing such a move and leaps of trust are not risk-free. But it is important to remember in any discussion

of this kind that there are no risk-free nuclear futures in the Middle East or elsewhere. And when we consider the risks and costs of misplaced trust, we also need to remember that there are significant risks and costs that follow from policies of misplaced suspicion. Perhaps, then, with the Iranian nuclear clock ticking increasingly ominously for many in the region and beyond, this is the moment for one side to make a 'leap of trust' on the nuclear issue.

