Round Up the Usual Suspects

The art of national security policy requires at least a three-dimensional understanding of risks: risks that exist today; risks that might arise tomorrow; and risks that might emerge in the context of implementing a new security strategy. An incomplete risk analysis can be informative and insightful, but by itself can lead to warped assessments and, ultimately, bad policy.

In "Strategic Stability in Europe: Risks with Low Numbers of US and Russian Nuclear Weapons" (20.2, July 2013, pp. 205–45), David S. Yost offers a serious, expert-informed survey of the risks that might arise for strategic stability (defined as a situation with a low probability of major-power war) in Europe with the implementation of a new security strategy—the reduction of US and Russian nuclear arsenals to "low numbers" (defined as 1,000 or fewer nuclear weapons on each side). Yost's "risk list" is frighteningly long—eleven items in all—and it informs his related survey of four possible measures for managing instability and containing these risks.

Yost concludes that the four measures he examines:

> probably could not compensate for the potentially negative consequences for strategic stability and the credibility of US extended deterrence of reductions to low numbers of US and Russian nuclear forces. … The challenges in maintaining US and allied confidence in NATO's deterrence and defense posture could be much greater in a situation of low numbers than with the negotiated New START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] levels.

Thus, Yost is content to maintain the New START status quo for the foreseeable future, as well as the "sustained basing" of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe as a crucial hedge against low numbers.

In other words, Yost rounds up the usual suspects and draws the usual conclusions. A more complete assessment of risk, however, as well as a more positive assessment of the prospects for shaping the Euro-Atlantic security environment, has led other analysts and policy makers, including President Barack Obama in his June 19 speech in Berlin, to a different conclusion. It's worth discussing why.

Yost makes clear that his essay is a one-dimensional survey of the risks that might arise for strategic stability when one variable changes—the reduction of US and Russian nuclear arsenals to low numbers. There is no attempt at misdirection here. Moreover, the list of risks he generates is both comprehensive and grounded in discussions with European governmental and nongovernmental experts (he makes clear these discussions did not constitute a poll or systematic opinion survey) and his own extensive experience. This is valuable work and a significant contribution to the field of European security.

That said, what Yost takes off the analytic table—and his explanations as to why—makes clear the limitations of his article, in particular as a policy guide.

To begin, while Yost notes there is a diversity of European opinion on the question of low numbers and their impact on European security, he characterizes the divide as between "*those discounting risks and those concerned about them*." (Emphasis added.) Later in his discussion of possible mechanisms for managing instability, he states, "Observers *who see no risks* of instability in a supposed 'low numbers' situation have *logically perceived no need* to consider what mechanisms might be employed to manage instability." (Emphasis added.)

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While there are pure "risk discounters" involved in this discussion who see no need for corresponding measures in moving to low numbers, more prevalent are those—including former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former Senator Sam Nunn—whose assessment of nuclear risks begins with the risks *they see* that exist *today* associated with the nuclear status quo; and the risks *they see* that will exist *tomorrow* without a more concerted effort to reduce and ultimately eliminate nuclear dangers. In their words:

> It is far from certain that today's world can successfully replicate the Cold War Soviet-American deterrence by 'mutually assured destruction'—the threat of imposing unacceptable damage on the adversary. That was based essentially on a bipolar world. But when a large and growing number of nuclear adversaries confront multiple perceived threats, the relative restraint of the Cold War will be difficult to sustain. *The risk that deterrence will fail and that nuclear weapons will be used increases dramatically. Global leaders owe it to their publics to reduce, and eventually to eliminate, these risks*. (Emphasis added.)[1]

These considerations are absent from Yost's survey of risks—and inevitably color his conclusion that the nuclear status quo, exemplified by New START force postures and the deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, is a low-risk baseline and a desired outcome from the standpoint of strategic stability and European security.

Moreover, many Europeans and Americans who fall in the "Shultz-Perry-Kissinger-Nunn" camp and their more comprehensive assessment of nuclear risks also logically see the need to implement a series of political and security measures (broader than those analyzed by Yost) to accompany further nuclear reductions and changes to nuclear force postures. Again, in the words of Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, and Nunn, "Reconciling national perspectives on nuclear deterrence is a challenging problem, and comprehensive solutions must be developed. A world without nuclear weapons will not simply be today's world minus nuclear weapons."[2] Yet Yost's analysis of risks basically assumes today's world as a constant—and gives little if any weight to the contribution lower numbers, combined with other steps, would make to reducing nuclear risks and improving global and regional security.

A more multidimensional and comprehensive analysis of both risks and possible measures to manage instability would produce a more encouraging conclusion. In particular, if lower numbers in US and Russian nuclear arsenals were employed as part of a fresh approach to Euro-Atlantic security—one designed to improve security and stability for all peoples in the region over the next decade (and reduce costs during a period of severe austerity)—many of the risks that Yost identifies from his Cold War-era Rolodex (i.e., renewed European anxiety about a US-Russian condominium; greater vulnerability to Russian cheating and breakout; increased incentives to adopt destabilizing first strike, preemption, or launch-on-warning strategies; potential stimulus to European nuclear proliferation; perceptions of a US disengagement from extended deterrence;

[1] George P. Schultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "Next Steps in Reducing Nuclear Risks," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2013, <www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/publications/next-steps-in-reducing-nuclear-risks-the-pace-of-nonproliferation-work-today-doesnt-match-the-urgency-of-the-threat>.

[2] George P. Schultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "Deterrence in the Age of Nuclear Proliferation," *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2011, <www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/publications/deterrence-in-the-age-of-nuclear-proliferation>.

possible fragmentation in alliance defense efforts; political hedging vis-à-vis Russia; increased likelihood of non-nuclear arms competitions and conflicts; and pressures on UK and French nuclear forces) would appear far less ominous and more manageable.

Admittedly, designing and implementing a new approach to Euro-Atlantic security is easier said then done—in particular at a time when US and Russian relations are frayed and there remains a corrosive lack of trust across the region, fueled by historical animosities and uncertainties in the European and global security landscape. That said, some Europeans and Americans who served on both sides of the Cold War are busy designing just such an approach in a track-two dialogue led by former British defense secretary Desmond Browne, former German deputy foreign minister Wolfgang Ischinger, former Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov, and Sam Nunn. Their recent report on "Building Mutual Security in the Euro-Atlantic Region" provides a roadmap for getting out from under Cold War-era strategies and tactics that are ill-suited to the real risks and threats we face today—and are likely to face tomorrow.[3]

Of course, more encouraging than a track-two dialogue would be a move by the Obama administration to place the issue of Euro-Atlantic security on its second term front burner, combined with a strategy for advancing the nuclear policy initiatives flagged by President Obama in his Berlin speech—including one-third cuts in deployed strategic warheads and "bold" reductions in tactical nuclear weapons (which, even if implemented, will be well above the "low numbers" range of Yost's analysis). So far, both the priority and strategy are lacking from the US side.

Unfortunately, in the absence of fresh thinking and new strategies by policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic, one-dimensional risk analysis grounded in the Cold War will survive and even thrive. Perhaps the most obvious example from Yost's essay of the bad policy that can arise from this stasis is the conclusion he cites that, in the event of reductions to low numbers, there is "an imperative need for the United States to retain nuclear weapons and dual capable aircraft in Europe."

The conclusion that a nuclear bomb with no military utility is reassuring to certain allies—or that the United States and NATO should continue to invest scarce defense resources on tactical nuclear weapons capabilities that provide no modicum of deterrence beyond that already provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France at the expense of weapons and capabilities that are relevant to the threats NATO faces today—can only survive in a static risk analysis, one that completely discounts the view that tactical nuclear weapons in the Euro-Atlantic region are more of a security risk than asset to NATO. This more dynamic assessment of risks and costs underpins the call from a number of US and European senior statesmen across the political spectrum for "eliminating short-range nuclear weapons designed to be forward deployed."[4]

Finally, there is an illusion of analytic precision that comes with distance from political decision making. In 2000, I sat in the White House Cabinet Room with President Bill Clinton as he was briefed on a survey of the risks that might arise if he were to agree with President Vladimir Putin on a lower ceiling in START III discussions (1,500–2,000 strategic nuclear warheads) than was agreed three years earlier with

[3] Des Browne, Wolfgang Ischinger, Igor Ivanov, and Sam Nunn, "Building Mutual Security in the Euro-Atlantic Region," Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2013, <www.buildingmutualsecurity.org>.

[4] George P. Schultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007, <www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/publications/a-world-free-of-nuclear-weapons>.

President Boris Yeltsin in Helsinki (2,000–2,500 warheads). After listening intently to a long list of potential risks of lower numbers generated by the Pentagon, the president simply asked (paraphrasing), "Do you really think a Russian president would be deterred by 2,500 warheads but not by 2,000? One is enough." It is that level of political analysis—and reality—that we need more of in the debate over lower numbers.

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Reading David S. Yost's article, one is left with the impression that the last fifty years have not happened. Yost—and the unnamed European experts whom he cites—cling to the old enemy image of the Russian bear, where the Iron Curtain still hangs and everybody believes in nuclear deterrence.

There is little acknowledgment that, prior to the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, we observed massive reductions in nuclear weapons without endangering our security. Yost seems terrified by the prospect of further reductions below the numbers mandated in the New START. That the Department of Defense has considered reductions to 800–1,000, or even 300 deployed strategic warheads for both the United States and Russia, endangers—in Yost's eyes—strategic stability in Europe, which for him can only be guaranteed by the combined strategic nuclear arsenals of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, as well as the implicit threat to use US tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe on the soil of five NATO allies.

Yost attempts to analyze risks that arise with low numbers of nuclear weapons in NATO. Although he admits that those risks are "inherently speculative," he refers to the "apparent contribution of nuclear weapons to strategic stability in Europe since the foundation of NATO." If strategic stability is defined "as a situation in which there is a low probability of major power war," NATO's new Strategic Concept does not envision such a risk. Rather, the risks enumerated in the new Strategic Concept are: cyberattacks, terrorism, organized crime, migration and, at the end, a small possibility of conventional threats.

If you examine the situation in Europe, there is only the small possibility of the resumption of dormant conflicts—for instance if the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo is not resolved or the conflict in Bosnia escalates. Would nuclear weapons be employed to reduce these risks?

In Yost's scenario, Russia remains the "enemy" and there is "renewed European anxiety about a potential US-Russian condominium, greater vulnerability to Russian cheating, noncompliance, and breakout." To underpin this new European anxiety, Yost cites more than fifty unidentified experts from almost every European state.

Obviously, he has not talked to many observers who support ending NATO's reliance on nuclear deterrence, or those who favor a world without nuclear weapons. In Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands, there are many experts, parliamentarians, and nongovernmental organizations working intently to remove US tactical nuclear weapons from European soil. In Belgium and Germany, parliaments have voted for removal of these weapons. Many foreign ministers in Europe support reductions in the number of nuclear weapons and even their eventual elimination. Nevertheless, it is understandable that Poland and the Baltic states—who have suffered at the hands of Russia—still support extended deterrence.

Yost sees no alternative to maintaining nuclear deterrence because he sees Russia as the enemy that cannot be trusted,

one that erects high hurdles to further reductions offered by President Barack Obama. But there are legitimate reasons for Russia to seek negotiations on missile defenses, long-range non-nuclear precision systems, conventional military forces, and other new capabilities such as drones.

Russia has been relying on nuclear weapons to compensate for its weakness in conventional armaments. Russia sees its potential for second strike at risk, because of US-plans for missile defenses. Moreover, it fears the build-up of US conventional capabilities (so-called prompt global strike), that can have an impact similar to nuclear weapons, as a threat to its security.

Importantly, Russian nuclear weapons accountable under New START are already below the levels mandated by that treaty, while US numbers still have to come down.

It is true that Russia has changed its doctrine, but we must not forget that this was a reaction to the sharp changes of US nuclear doctrine issued by President George W. Bush in 2002 that supported making nuclear weapons tools for warfighting instead of political instruments of deterrence.

We should make every possible effort to overcome nuclear deterrence, to return to transparency and confidence building, to agree upon reductions and restrictions in arms and armed forces—in short, to return to a situation that we had when we agreed on the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty in 1990. We need regional stability, but we can only create it by working with Russia. Stability can be accomplished by strengthening the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, respecting international humanitarian law, bolstering the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, ratifying the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, and negotiating a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty, thus establishing the necessary framework for a world without nuclear weapons.

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South Asian Security Through Elimination, Not Cuts

From a formidable combined nuclear stockpile of almost 70,000 weapons at the height of the Cold War, the numbers of warheads in the US and Russian arsenals have been steadily declining. This has mostly been achieved through unilateral (but cooperative) or bilateral arms control arrangements. Speaking in Berlin in June, President Barack Obama expressed a desire to further cut back the number of deployed strategic weapons by one-third, to about 1,000 warheads. Do these reductions matter to other nuclear-armed states? The answer to this question may vary from region to region depending on the specific regional role that US nuclear weapons play.

Generally and intuitively speaking, a reduction in nuclear numbers should be a welcome development. If nothing else, it provides a notional sense of reassurance that the radioactive rubble would bounce a few times less in the event of a nuclear exchange. But for the reductions to count for more, it depends on other steps that may accompany the move. Are these conceived as part of a larger plan to achieve global nuclear disarmament, or will these weapons simply be replaced with other means of warfare?

Though President Obama has expressed a personal desire for a nuclear weapon-free world, the link between these reductions to that objective is tenuous.

Even with reduced numbers, the United States intends to rely on nuclear deterrence; it has increased funding to refurbish both the weapons and the infrastructure to maintain them. Meanwhile, the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review emphasizes strengthening US conventional capabilities to offset the reduced role of nuclear weapons. It almost flaunts US capabilities to fight all types of conflicts with the help of its ballistic missile defenses, its ability for global basing, as well as its assets in cyberspace and outer space. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that other nuclear-armed states are neither overly impressed nor positively influenced by the reductions planned or proposed by the United States.

What kind of an impact, then, could these reductions have on the nuclear-armed states in South Asia? In a coherently analyzed article, S. Paul Kapur ("The Effects on South Asia of Deep US Nuclear Reductions," 20.2, July 2013, pp. 279–88) discusses the five possible impacts of US nuclear reductions: direct effects, indirect effects, formal deterrence, informal deterrence, and normative influence. However, he finds only one of these—informal deterrence, as provided by the United States through its engagement in the region—as being likely to affect Indian and Pakistani strategic calculations. He contends that "India relies on the US regional presence to help provide stabilizing public goods, such as freedom of navigation, and [to] protect it against potentially threatening neighbors." And therefore, he argues, "Indians may perceive deep nuclear cuts to be part of a larger project of US retrenchment, foreshadowing a major regional drawdown" which causes them to "find current US nuclear entrenchment to be worrisome." Kapur says these views are based on discussions with unnamed "senior serving members of the Ministry of External Affairs and of Parliament in New Delhi between 2010 and 2012." He further argues that the loss of the benefits of informal deterrence may make India respond with arms racing or coalition building, which could be seen as threatening by China and/or Pakistan.

Kapur's conclusion, however, can be challenged on two fronts. First, he insinuates that India has been freeloading on the US presence in the region to meet its security requirements. Is this really true? Has the US presence really been able to address Indian security concerns arising from Pakistan's willful use of terrorism? Has it served to tone down Chinese assertiveness? A review of developments over the last decade or so makes clear that US presence in the region has constrained neither Pakistan nor China from indulging in destabilizing behavior and actions against India. And when this has happened, India has used its own diplomacy or deterrent tools to handle the situation.

While India certainly cherishes the strategic partnership that it presently enjoys with the United States, a state the size of India placed in a difficult, nuclearized neighborhood with active territorial disputes certainly understands that it has to independently shoulder the burden of its own security, including maintaining a capability to ensure freedom of navigation. This requirement will temper India's military modernization, just as its deterrence-by-punishment doctrine—conveyed by its ability to cause unacceptable damage after surviving a nuclear attack—will modulate its nuclear buildup. And its nuclear buildup will be modulated by a doctrine premised on deterrence by punishment conveyed by the ability to cause unacceptable damage after surviving a nuclear attack. US nuclear weapons have never provided any informal deterrence to India, not before India developed its own nuclear weapons and certainly not now.

Second, even if one accepts Kapur's contention that India has enjoyed the benefit of deterrence offered by the US regional presence (not necessarily by its nuclear weapons), there should be no reason for New Delhi to be worried by US *nuclear* reductions leading to a regional drawdown, given the recent US plans to

focus on the Asia-Pacific region. US conventional superiority (and plans to further enhance it) should more than suffice to continue providing a form of deterrence to the South Asian region.

Therefore, US nuclear reductions have no real impact on the South Asian nuclear environment in any of the five dimensions that Kapur has identified. Rather, as he has rightly inferred, because China is unlikely to respond to any US reductions with cuts of its own, no change in the nuclear positions of India and Pakistan can be expected either. On the contrary, all indicators of China's ongoing strategic modernization show it to be sharply focused on redressing its own threat perceptions arising from US advances in ballistic missile defense and efforts to develop conventional prompt global strike weapons. China perceives US plans to use its bombers and long range missiles—including hypersonic cruise missiles and orbital strike systems—for the purpose of striking "high value, time sensitive" terrorist targets, as a threat to its nuclear deterrence. In order to redress this situation, it is increasing the numbers of its own missiles—conventional and nuclear. Evidently then, fewer nuclear warheads in the US arsenal do not reduce China's threat perceptions.

If any significant advantage for international security is to be derived from US nuclear reductions, they must be part of a larger game plan to move toward universal nuclear disarmament. This, however, is only possible if nuclear cutbacks are accompanied by other measures that mitigate the threat perceptions of adversaries and reduce the overall salience of nuclear weapons. It is precisely because nuclear weapons complicate India's security plans that it continues to campaign for universal and verifiable nuclear disarmament. Contrary to a view Kapur attributes to Indian leaders, India does not need nuclear weapons to prove to anyone that "they are no longer second-class world citizens." India acquired nuclear weapons solely to deter the use of an adversary's nuclear weapons, and if these could be eliminated through universal nuclear disarmament, India's national security would be strengthened. Mere reductions, on the other hand, would have only limited benefits.

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Strategy and Posture Trump Size

To the extent that US nuclear weapons contribute to overall stability in the Middle East, it is not readily apparent how the size *per se* of the US nuclear arsenal specifically affects, if at all, the security of the region. As James A. Russell correctly notes ("Nuclear Reductions and Middle East Stability: Assessing the Impact of a Smaller US Nuclear Arsenal," 20.2, July 2013, pp. 263–78), the United States has a conventional presence in the Gulf that can fulfill any conceivable military mission in the Middle East.

However, the Middle East is experiencing historic change, a process which is adding new strains to an already volatile regional security environment. This profoundly unstable and dynamic condition makes US strategic planning for the region particularly difficult.

But if one were to project regional contingencies in which US nuclear weapons could play a more prominent role and in which US nuclear strategy could be challenged, three major scenarios come to mind:

- A local confrontation with Russia that could escalate and lead to a strategic thermonuclear exchange;
- Iran's acquisition and deployment of a nuclear weapon; or
- The loss of US forward bases in the Middle East.

US nuclear strategy is based on deterrence —dissuading an adversary from aggression by the US ability and willingness to impose costs greater than any potential benefits.

During the Cold War, US nuclear strategists debated intensely how the goal of nuclear deterrence could best be achieved. The more dominant view within US government circles was that US strategic superiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union (which often translated in numerical superiority in strategic forces) was the best way to deter a Soviet nuclear first strike and massive conventional aggression against European allies. Some, however, maintained that "essential parity" or "rough equivalence" was sufficient. Others, in the minority, believed that because nuclear weapons are able to impose such enormous costs, deterrence could be met with a low level of weaponry, perhaps even lower than that held by the other side.

More than two decades have passed since the end of the Cold War, yet consensus on what (or how much) it actually takes for the United States to effectively deter present and future nuclear and nonnuclear adversaries continues to be elusive. In the Middle East, a robust US regional military presence has helped deter, with some exceptions, major security threats against US interests and military aggression against US allies. Because the United States currently faces no local foes that possess nuclear weapons (though Iran and Syria have chemical and, possibly, even biological weapons), a reduced US nuclear arsenal has, at least technically, no bearing, positive or negative, on its ability to deter them. For example, if Tehran and Damascus are not deterred by the prospect of annihilation by a larger US nuclear arsenal, then an inventory that is potentially cut by one-third or even half should, logically, make no difference in their cost-benefit calculations (a US nuclear attack with a single warhead, or even a massive conventional onslaught, is enough to obliterate or threaten the national survival of both Iran and Syria).

What is far more likely to pacify the designs and intentions of US local adversaries in the Middle East is not the number of nuclear weapons in the US arsenal, but Washington's credibility at home and abroad. Indeed, what leaders in Tehran and Damascus constantly watch for and analyze is the domestic political standing and popularity of the US president, the level of cohesion and unity within his cabinet, and the kind of opposition he faces from the rival domestic political party. They also look carefully at his response to various regional crises, the level of commitment he has toward his regional allies, the type of regional presence his military forces have, and his willingness to back up his words and follow through on threats he issues.

While President Barack Obama has, on multiple occasions, confirmed his commitment to the security of his regional allies and bolstered their military capabilities, there are questions regarding almost every other category listed above. In short, the Obama administration's overall reaction to a historical event such as the "Arab awakening" has been lethargic and confused. Obama's call on Arab dictators to step down fell on deaf ears. His policy responses to the various crises in Libya, Egypt, and Syria have been timid and ineffective. His red line on the use of chemical weapons in Syria has been crossed, multiple times, by the Syrian government. At no time in the history of US foreign policy has US credibility in the Middle East been lower than it is at present. US regional adversaries and allies view with increasing alarm the relative decline of US standing in the region.

A new US Middle East strategy that is strategically viable, politically sustainable, ideologically coherent, and operationally

flexible is urgently needed. Such a strategy will have a much more significant effect on regional security and US nuclear strategy in the Middle East than the size of the US nuclear arsenal.

As Russia and China expand their role and influence in the energy-rich Middle East, it is not unthinkable or foolish to entertain potential scenarios whereby either of these two states could find itself locked into a regional crisis with the United States that could escalate and ultimately lead to nuclear use. Because China's intentions in the Middle East are far less ambitious and its physical presence much less entrenched than Russia's, focusing on a potential Russo-American local confrontation makes sense.

While the United States and Russia are certainly on much better terms today than during the Soviet era, there is still a great deal of uncertainty and adversity in their relations. In classic geopolitical terms, Russia—with its nuclear arsenal that can uniquely threaten the national survival of the United States, its vast and modern armed forces that can project military power globally, and its wealth of natural resources—is still the biggest counterweight to US power and influence around the world. In the Middle East, Russia is a principal military, economic, and geopolitical partner of Iran and Syria, and its Middle Eastern policy is in direct competition with that of the United States. Russia has been actively engaged in the Middle East since the 19th century. But recently, it has pursued a more assertive course in the region, at times significantly challenging US policy, by forming strategic alliances with, and selling arms to, anti-US governments in Syria and Iran.

The idea that Russia could go to war with the United States in and over the Middle East may seem farfetched. Russia knows its limits and understands the devastating consequences of conflict with the United States. Furthermore, Russia's vital national security interests lie in Eurasia, not the Middle East, thus making its drive to defy and escalate in the Middle East less likely. However, politics, intentions, and threat perceptions in Moscow may change. In addition, deterrence could fail because of accidents and misperceptions.

Open source information suggests that Russia does not currently have nuclear weapons deployed in the Middle East, but the United States does. An estimated 150–200 B61 gravity bombs are forward deployed in Europe at six bases in five NATO states, including the Incirlik base in Turkey, a major Middle Eastern state. But Russian nuclear designs in the Middle East could change in the not-so-distant future. Moscow reportedly plans to send nuclear submarines to the region in phases over several years. According to a RIA Novosti report, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that nuclear submarines could be deployed as part of a permanent taskforce in the Mediterranean to defend Russia's interests in the area.[5]

A US-Russian exchange involving tactical weapons in the Middle East might stay limited to the regional level because both the United States and Russia would have an interest in keeping the war away from their territory. But waging a limited nuclear war and controlling the escalation ladder is an untested and highly risky proposition. Even if both sides were to resort to strategic strikes, given the sheer size of the US and Russian arsenals, it is unclear how the total number of US (or Russian) nuclear weapons matters, other than to affect Moscow's *perceptions* (and possibly planning).

Convincing US superiority in regional conventional arms is enough to deter potential Iranian bellicosity. The United States does not need a larger nuclear arsenal, or arguably any nuclear weapons for that matter, to deter Iran from building the bomb, closing the Strait of Hormuz, or

[5] RIA Novosti, "Russia's Mediterranean Task Force to Include Nuclear Subs—Navy Chief," May 12, 2013, <http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20130512/181098977.html>.

attacking US interests and allies. But it is precisely because the conventional balance in the region is decisively in the United States and its allies' favor that Iran's temptation toward nuclear weapons to redress the balance is so strong.

Should Iran manage to cross the nuclear threshold, it will challenge US nuclear deterrence strategy in the Middle East in several important ways. However, because US military forces in the region have such an overwhelming presence and the US nuclear arsenal (even a smaller one) can inflict total destruction on Iran, Tehran's acquisition of an atomic bomb will not undermine the *physical ability* of the United States to act and defend itself and its strategic interests. Rather, a nuclear Iran is likely to complicate Washington's cost-benefit calculations and make it more cautious or perhaps hesitant to use force in the region in response to Iranian violent or undesirable acts. This could inject uncertainty into US extended deterrence in the Middle East and its commitment to the security of its US allies, prompting them to seek their own nuclear weapons. A scenario of nuclear cascade in the Middle East in which Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are armed with nuclear weapons is not inevitable but entirely possible. And contrary to what strategic analyst and political scientist Kenneth Waltz argued, "more is not better," and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East hardly contributes to regional stability.

If Iran goes nuclear, perhaps the only way to restore US credibility and keep US nuclear strategy relevant in Iran's eyes would be to change the arsenal's posture, i.e., the forces, organizational procedures, and doctrine adopted to operationalize US nuclear capabilities. A more aggressive posture, one that deploys nuclear weapons tactically and threatens to respond asymmetrically to conventional aggression by using nuclear weapons first, could deter Iranian post-nuclear designs more effectively. As bad as an Iranian bomb might be, mere possession is not what should solely concern US policy makers. The United States would still need to deter Iran from using nuclear weapons as both political and war-fighting instruments.

To the extent that the future of US forward deployed bases becomes increasingly uncertain because of regional turmoil (thus weakening US conventional deterrence), the role of nuclear weapons in deterring Iran and preserving Middle East stability is likely to increase. This is particularly true because the United States has reduced the number of aircraft carrier groups in the region due to budget cuts. The future of the Fifth Fleet's base in Bahrain is also in question as that country deals with growing political instability. Should the United States become less able to project conventional power in the region due to domestic politics and regional change, nuclear weapons can provide more a cost-effective means of achieving deterrence.

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