



Extended Deterrence, Security Guarantees, and Nuclear Weapons: U.S. Strategic and Policy Conundrums in the Gulf

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In July 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters during a visit to Bangkok: “We want Iran to calculate what I think is a fair assessment that if the United States extends a defense umbrella over the region, if we do even more to support the military capacity of those in the Gulf, it's unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer because they won't be able to intimidate and dominate as they apparently believe they can once they have a nuclear weapon.”

Some seized upon these comments as an indication that the United States would be prepared to explicitly commit its strategic nuclear deterrent to the defense of the region. The strategic nuclear deterrent would fit together in a seamless web of conventional and nuclear weapons as part of a U.S.-backed system of regional security to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran from creating a coercive political framework to intimidate its smaller gulf neighbors. Not all America's regional allies found her comments useful. Israeli officials immediately criticized Secretary Clinton's statement as evidence that the United States would accept the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran. Reaction in Arab capitals was more muted, although Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stated that Egypt would not participate in such an umbrella and would not allow foreign troops on its soil.[\[1\]](#)

Secretary Clinton's formulation contains a number of interesting elements and usefully raises many questions about U.S. regional strategy and policy. A core issue is simply this: what roles do the estimated 2,200 operational nuclear warheads that constitute the nation's strategic nuclear deterrent play in America's security strategy in the Gulf?

Clinton's remarks come as the Obama Administration is drafting the congressionally-mandated 2009-2010 Nuclear Posture Review. Due out in February 2010, the report is expected to describe the Administration's plans for the size and configuration of the nuclear arsenal and the role of these weapons in national security strategy. President Obama reportedly ordered drafters of the report at the Pentagon to go back to the drawing board to embrace further deep cuts in the nuclear arsenal consistent with his Administration's commitment to an aggressive disarmament agenda.[\[2\]](#)

The paper will address the challenges facing policy-makers in the Gulf region as they seek to square the Obama Administration's policy goals of nuclear disarmament with a variety of regional security commitments that, as indicated by Secretary Clinton, may implicitly draw upon the nuclear arsenal. This paper will explore the issues that the NPR drafters should be considering as they think through the role of the strategic arsenal as tool to secure the nation's strategic objectives in the volatile Gulf and Middle East regions.

Past as Prologue?

How useful is the Cold War past in suggesting lessons for today's strategic planners in thinking through the role of nuclear weapons in regional strategy? The strategic deterrent has made episodic appearances as a tool of American foreign policy in the Middle East and the Gulf. Throughout most of the Cold War, nuclear weapons were seen as the ultimate guarantor of the broader military mission to "defend the region" against encroachment from outside powers like the Soviet Union. Planning for the use of nuclear weapons in the Middle East began in earnest in the early 1950s as military strategists sought ways to redress Soviet conventional military superiority around the world.

In June 1950, the National Security Council issued a report (NSC 26/3) titled *Demolition and Abandonment of Oil Facilities and Fields in the Middle East*. The report addressed the possibility of plugging Saudi oil wells "as a means of conservation and denial during enemy occupation." Nuclear weapons were looked at as a possible tool to deny the Soviets access to the oil fields. The report found, "Denial of wells by radiological means can be accomplished to prevent an enemy from utilizing the oil, but it could not prevent him from forcing 'expendable' Arabs to enter the contaminated areas to open well heads and deplete the reservoirs. Therefore, aside from other ill effects on the Arab population, it is not considered that radiological means are practicable as a conservation measure."^[3] Such was the initial (and unsuccessful) attempt to find a useful role for nuclear weapons in regional strategy.

In October 1973, U.S. forces—including the Strategic Air Command—were placed on heightened alert in response to possible Soviet military intervention to keep the Israelis from destroying the surrounded Egyptian Third Army. During the crisis, Henry Kissinger sent Soviet leader Brezhnev a message stating that the introduction of Soviet troops into the region would represent a violation of the recently signed Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Nuclear War. The implication of Kissinger's message was obvious: introduction of Soviet troops could have led to a nuclear face-off between the Cold War antagonists.

In January 1980, following the takeover of the American embassy in Iran and in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter stated, "An attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." At the time, Carter's statement was widely considered to encompass the use of nuclear weapons in response to a potential Soviet advance onto the Gulf. In February 1980, details of a Pentagon report emerged indicating that the United States might have to use tactical nuclear weapons in response to a Soviet move towards the Gulf.^[4] The Pentagon study, *Capabilities in the Persian Gulf*, helped form the basis for recommendations to create the Rapid Joint Deployment Task Force, which later became the U.S. Central Command.

In the spring of 1996, the application of the strategic deterrent in the region occurred in the context of counterproliferation policy. The United States detected construction of an underground site at Tarhuna in Libya that was widely believed to be related to Libya's production of chemical-warfare agents. Secretary of Defense William Perry stated that the United States would consider a wide range of options to ensure that Tarhuna did not become operational. In discussing the Libyan site, Perry stated that any country attacking the United

States with chemical weapons would “have to fear the consequences of a response from any weapon in our inventory.” He further elaborated that “we could make a devastating response without the use of nuclear weapons, but we would not forswear that possibility.”^[5]

Potential use of nuclear weapons emerged in wars with Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003. Statements made by a variety of senior government officials in both crises reflected a belief by decision makers that the nuclear arsenal had a role in deterring the potential use of chemical or biological weapons against U.S. forces.

In the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, the Bush Administration assigned a variety of roles to nuclear weapons in the region. ^[6] The 2003 NPR noted that nuclear weapons could both reassure allies of the U.S. commitment to their security and could dissuade potential adversaries from competing against American pre-eminence. The document strongly implied that the strategic deterrent was committed to the defense of Israel. It specifically suggested that nuclear weapons might be needed to target hardened and deeply buried targets in the region. The 2009-2010 NPR will have to address some of these same issues.

Conceptual and Strategic Clarity?

The NPR drafters face a tall order insofar as their deliberations involve the application of the strategic deterrent in the Gulf. Despite the fact that the region is home to over 150,000 troops housed in an extensive and widely dispersed basing infrastructure, there has been little strategic thinking about U.S. regional strategy and policy since the decision to defend the Arabian Peninsula and evict Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1990. After the war, the United States essentially settled upon a comfortable “holding action” administered by its Navy and Air Force under the rubric of enforcing United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions—an approach that continued the strategic drift in U.S. strategy and policy. To the extent that the approach of the 1990s era of “dual containment” can be considered a strategy—it’s clear that the approach failed on at least one count: Iranian influence is perceived to be on the rise, courtesy of the removal of its major regional adversary, Saddam Hussein, courtesy of the United States military.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq initially justified as a preventative war based on counter-proliferation objectives came not a result of strategic clarity but from the strategic drift and obtuseness of the 1990s that then became coupled with the ill-defined concept of the “war on terror.” While useful for domestic political purposes the term served no strategic use and created conceptual confusion from which U.S. security strategy still suffers. Symptomatic of the strategic fog is the disinterest in exploring the “real” reasons for the Iraq invasion and determining whether the invasion today could be at all related to national strategic objectives.

Today, American regional strategy seems shaped more by the inexorable forces of organizational and bureaucratic momentum than by enunciated strategic requirements by the national command authority. The U.S. forward deployed military has built out a vast physical basing infrastructure in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. For example, the 5th Fleet Headquarters in Manama, Bahrain, occupies 62 acres that is home to 54 tenant commands. In the last five years, the Air Force has poured over \$60 million in military construction into Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates that is now home to 1000-odd military personnel that work at the base’s Information, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) Launch and Recovery Facility and Maintenance Complex. Another \$75 million in military construction funding has been used

to construct an “aerial port” at Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait. Hundreds of millions in military construction projects has created many large bases in Iraq. These are but a few examples of the way in which U.S. Gulf strategy is being “built” by Army Corps of Engineers projects instead of policy pronouncements from civilian and military leaders.

Since President Carter’s pronouncement, no subsequent administration has articulated an enduring formulation of American strategic interests in the region and the role that force, including nuclear weapons, would play in securing those objectives.^[7] Directly relating nuclear weapons—whatever their number -- to strategic objectives will thus require a clear enunciation of those strategic objectives—objectives that remain unclear in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Does the United States still seek to defend the region? If so, from whom? Does it see its military presence as a tool to preserve regional stability and manage the regional balance of power? If so, what should a stable balance look like and what role should its conventional and nuclear forces play in maintaining that balance? Does it see the forward deployed force as an instrument to help create democracy and civil societies? What is the role of conventional and nuclear forces as an instrument of nonproliferation policy? Is the forward deployed presence intended primarily to preserve stable pricing in world energy markets? All these unanswered questions only deepen the intellectual fog surrounding American strategic objectives in the Gulf.^[8]

Extended Deterrence and Security Assurances in the Gulf

Secretary Clinton’s pronouncement interestingly addresses some of these issues—despite the lack of an overarching strategic and policy framework. It in some senses her remarks provide a useful starting point for strategic planners working on the NPR to consider the role that nuclear weapons could and even should take as a tool in furthering American regional interests. In the Gulf, the United States maintains a complex and intersecting web of conventional and nuclear guarantees meant to reassure allies of American commitment to their security and to deter adversaries from threatening those allies.^[9] Not all the recipients of these guarantees are on friendly terms. For example, the United States maintains close security relationships with regional antagonists in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, which operate under U.S. protection, have no diplomatic relations with Israel, which is also the recipient of American security guarantees.

In Israel’s case, it has been the object of repeated and specific assurances of American commitment up to and including nuclear weapons if necessary. In extending a nuclear umbrella over Israel,^[10] senior American officials have repeatedly made veiled references of their commitment to use all means at their disposal to defend Israel up to and including nuclear weapons. Vice President Dick Cheney offered the following representative formulation of the American commitment to Israeli security in 2008 when he stated: “America’s commitment to Israel’s security is enduring and unshakable . . . as is our commitment to Israel’s right to defend itself always against terrorism, rocket attacks and other threats from forces dedicated to Israel’s destruction.”^[11] Then-President Bush specifically stated in February 2006 that the United States would defend Israel militarily in the event of an attack by Iran.^[12] In October 2007, President Bush went so far as to state that a nuclear-armed Iran might lead to World War III.^[13] In remarks that received no disavowals from government sources, then-Democratic presidential

candidate Hillary Clinton stated in April 2008 that the United States would “obliterate” Iran if it ever attacked Israel with nuclear weapons.[14]

Clinton’s remarks in Bangkok reflect an implicit belief that this intersecting web of deterrent objectives and security commitments serve the dual purpose of (1) warning an adversary against any expectations that acquisition of nuclear weapons will lead to regional political dominance; and (2) reassuring regional allies that acquisition of nuclear weapons by the adversary will not subject them to coercive influence from the adversary as a result of American political and military commitment to their security. In this particular case, the statement is intended to signal Iran that no tangible benefit will obtain from nuclear weapons while simultaneously seeking to deter its allies from taking corresponding steps should Iran achieve nuclear weapons status. These assurances are thus regarded as a vital non-proliferation tool as the United States seeks to prevent a regional arms race in response to Iran’s apparent pursuit of a nuclear capability.

Her formulation reflects a firm historic grounding in the time-honored Cold War concepts of extended deterrence and security assurances, both of which have served as vitally important tools of American statecraft since the dawn of the nuclear age.[15] Extended deterrence is the threat to use force, including nuclear weapons, against an adversary that threatens an ally. As noted by political scientist Paul Huth: “The objective of extended deterrence is to protect other countries and territories from attack, as opposed to preventing a direct attack on one’s own national territory.”[16] Security assurances are the means through which the actor drawing upon extended deterrence conveys the commitment to an ally’s security. Each of these concepts is critically contingent on the credibility of the actor extending the deterrent umbrella and the security guarantees, which may or may not involve the specific commitment of nuclear weapons.[17] To be effective, the actor receiving these assurances and the antagonist threatening action must be convinced that the security provider is prepared to follow through on its conveyed commitments.[18]

The linked concepts of extended deterrence and security guarantees are nothing new to American security strategy.[19] During the Cold War, the United States’ commitment to defend Europe became operationalized through a series of extended deterrent commitments that included the basing of nuclear weapons in Europe that could have been used in the event of a Soviet attack. In Europe, the United States and its NATO allies eventually constructed a “seamless” web of conventional and nuclear capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defeat a Soviet invasion.[20]

More recently, United States clearly still believes that the concept has great relevance in Northeast Asia. In response to North Korean nuclear and missile tests during the last several years, senior U.S. officials quickly and routinely fan out to South Korea and Japan to “assure” them of America’s commitment to their security.[21] A main target of these efforts is to forestall the possibility that either South Korea or Japan will reconsider decisions not to develop nuclear weapons. Japan in particular has a robust nuclear infrastructure and is now widely considered to be a “latent” nuclear power that could develop a weapon reasonably quickly.

As is the case in Northeast Asia, the United States today routinely acts as if extended deterrence and security assurances together constitute active, ongoing and useful tools in managing its regional security relationships in the Gulf. Secretary Clinton’s recent remarks only represent the latest evidence that this is the case. In May 2006, for example, the Bush Administration embarked on a much ballyhooed “Gulf Security Dialogue” that sought to re-invigorate U.S.

security relationships with the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The initiative was presented as part of a consultative process to focus attention on building regional self defense capabilities; consulting on regional security issues like the Iran nuclear program and fallout of Iran's struggle against Sunni extremists; the U.S. invasion of Iraq; counter-proliferation; counter-terrorism and internal security; and critical infrastructure protection.^[22] The dialogue came as the Bush Administration proposed billions of dollars in new arms sales to Israel and its Gulf partners that included precision guided munitions such as the Joint Defense Attack Munition and the Advanced Medium Range Air to Air Missile.

The Gulf Security dialogue is but the latest chapter of an active and ongoing practice of reassurance that dates to the early 1990s, and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, to 1945 and the assurances made by President Roosevelt to the Saudi leader, King Abdul Aziz al-Saud. The United States has worked assiduously to operationalize conventionally-oriented extended deterrence commitments and security guarantees in the Gulf. As noted by Kathleen McKiness: "Extended deterrence is not a hands-off strategy. It cannot be created from a distance through a submarine capability in the Persian Gulf or a troop deployment in another country such as Iraq. It is a real, tangible, physical commitment, to be palpably felt both by allies and adversaries."^[23] The United States has indeed worked hard at this in the Gulf largely through its ever-efficient military bureaucracies.

In the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm, the United States actively sought and concluded a series of bilateral security agreements with each of the Gulf States that became operationalized under something called defense cooperation agreements, or DCAs. These commitments between the United States and the regional signatories contained a number of critical elements: (1) that the United States and the host nation should jointly respond to external threats when each party deemed necessary; (2) permitted access to host nation military facilities by U.S. military personnel; (3) permitted the pre-positioning of U.S. military equipment in the host nation as agreed by the parties; (4) and status of forces provisions which addressed the legal status of deployed U.S. military personnel. The United States today has agreements with all the Gulf States except Saudi Arabia, which is subject to similar bilateral security commitments conveyed in a variety of different forums. Under these agreements, the United States and the host nation annually convene meetings to review regional threats and developments in their security partnerships. One of the principal purposes of these meetings is for both sides to reassure the other side of their continued commitment to the security relationship. In short, this process operationalizes the conveyance of security guarantees in ways that reflect the principles in the DCAs.

Using this Cold War-era template, the United States built an integrated system of regional security in the 1990s that saw it: (1) preposition three brigades worth of military equipment in the Gulf in Qatar, Kuwait and afloat with the Maritime Pre-positioning ships program; (2) build host nation military capabilities through exercises, training and arms sales; and, (3) build out a physical basing infrastructure that continues its expansion today. Each of the Central Command's major service components today have forward headquarters in the region today spread between Arifjan in Kuwait, Al Udiid Air Base in Qatar and the 5th Fleet Naval Headquarters in Manama. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United States further added to this infrastructure with bases in Iraq and a space at Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates used by the Air Force for ISR missions.

As is the case in Northeast Asia, there is a substantial basing infrastructure with significant numbers of forward deployed U.S. military personnel. The major difference in Northeast Asia is that a hostile actor (North Korea) has already achieved a nuclear capability while in the Gulf, Iran may aspire to achieve North Korea's nuclear status. In Northeast Asia, the nuclear component of U.S. extended deterrence and security guarantees is palpable, whereas in the Gulf it is more implicit, or existential.

Conventional and Nuclear Deterrence

The build out of the U.S. military infrastructure points around the region provide the hosting states with tangible evidence of the credibility of the American military commitment to their security. The military footprint today in the Gulf is no "trip-wire" force, but is engaged in tangible military operations, such as the multi-national maritime security operations conducted in the Gulf and the Arabian Sea by the combined task force command operating out of the 5th Fleet Headquarters in Manama.

Since the British withdrawal from the Gulf in the early 1970s, the United States has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to deploy its conventional forces to the region in response to regional instability. Starting with Operation Earnest Will in 1988, the United States slowly but inexorably inserted itself into the role played by the British for over a century as protecting the Gulf States from external threats. Following Operation Desert Storm, the United States kept sufficient forces in theater to enforce the United Nations' cease fire resolutions on a recalcitrant Saddam. Last, but not least, it flowed significant forces and absorbed the monetary costs of toppling Saddam and providing a protective conventional force that can be readily called upon by the Iraq regime if needed. Given this history it is difficult to see how any state could doubt the credibility of the United States' commitments to use its conventional forces as an instrument of regional defense.

This history suggests an overwhelming emphasis on the role of conventional force in operationalizing American security guarantees and extended deterrent commitments. In the Gulf—unlike Northeast Asia—the role of nuclear weapons has never been explicitly spelled out and has very much remained in the background. However, while reference to nuclear weapons might remain unstated, the reality is that they are explicitly committed to defend American forces whenever the commander-in-chief might deem it necessary. The entire (and substantial) American military regional footprint operates under a quite explicit nuclear umbrella—headlines or no headlines. If a nuclear umbrella is indeed draped over America's forward deployed Gulf presence, it's hard not to see how that umbrella is similarly draped over the states that are hosting those forces. The only problem with Secretary Clinton's recent statements is that she seems unaware of this fact, i.e., the United States already maintains a nuclear umbrella backed by nuclear weapons in the region.

While the United States has pledged not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear signatories of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (known as negative security assurances), it maintains a policy of calculated ambiguity in honoring those commitments if its forces are attacked by chemical or biological weapons.^[24] President Clinton reinforced this position in Presidential Decision Memorandum 60 in December 1997, which stated:

The United States reaffirms that it will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon state-parties to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, except in the case of an invasion or any other attack on the United States, its territories, its armed forces or other troops, its allies, or on a state toward which it has a security commitment carried out, or sustained by such a non-nuclear-weapon state in association or alliance with a nuclear-weapon state.[25]

As previously noted, the United States last unsheathed this proverbial sword in 1996 with the discovery of a potential chemical weapons plant in Libya. The sword, however, remains at the ready in the Gulf where Iran's development of chemical weapons, long-range missiles, and its emphasis on terrorism and asymmetric warfare constitute prominent elements of the regional threat environment. If anything Iran's weakened conventional forces potentially drive Iranian military responses during an armed conflict to those weapons that would lead the United States to consider forswearing its negative security assurances.[26] In this scenario, it seems clear that American nuclear weapons are a component in the web of military capabilities designed to discourage Iranian use of its unconventional weapons in war.

Conclusion

Nuclear weapons have historically helped implicitly and explicitly support America's far flung global commitments in the Gulf and elsewhere. The system of Gulf security built by the United States reflects a time-honored template of regional defense and security honed in decades of Cold War experience. In the Gulf, the dual tools of extended deterrence and security assurances have proven a cornerstone of a system of regional security efficiently administered by America's military organizations. Nuclear weapons today undeniably form part of this system—explicitly protecting U.S. forces and implicitly protecting regimes hosting those forces.

It remains to be seen how today NPR drafters will address the historic context of these commitments in the Gulf and the role of nuclear weapons in helping maintain a Cold War-era template of regional security. Actively promoting nuclear disarmament on the one hand while also drawing upon nuclear weapons on the other to prevent a regional nuclear arms race in the Gulf is a contradiction that must be addressed by the NPR drafters. They must therefore try and square a series of circles of competing and contradictory requirements in relating nuclear weapons to global and regional strategic priorities.

The Obama Administration's aggressive disarmament agenda is sure to emphasize continued cuts in the strategic arsenal and will almost certainly include an attempt to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. A reduced number of warheads will need to be apportioned to national-level protection and extended deterrent commitments in Northeast Asia and the Gulf region. The possible signing of the CTBT will represent another nail in the coffin of what may become a "wasting asset" of strategic nuclear weapons in the American arsenal.[27] That stockpile is slowly withering away as aging weapons deteriorate and the human and material infrastructure around those weapons becomes more difficult and expensive to maintain.[28]

In short, the United States is slowly but surely disarming itself—a scenario that must be addressed in NPR. This trend will mean that the United States will one day be unable to draw upon any nuclear weapons to back extended guarantee commitments in the Gulf and elsewhere around the world. This inevitability will lead planners down some of the same paths of the 2002 report, which spent proposed using conventional weapons for missions once assigned to nuclear

weapons. In the Middle East, the problem of targeting hardened and deeply buried targets will rear its head in 2010 as it did in 2002.

In the Gulf, nuclear planners must determine the role played by nuclear weapons in the region. This in turn means drawing upon a set of clearly articulated regional objectives that have so far not been forthcoming. If policy-makers determine that extended deterrence and security guarantees are to remain as vital tools of strategy and policy (as implied by Secretary Clinton), the NPR will have to sort out the numbers and types of weapons that may be needed to fill these commitments while also satisfying the Obama Administration's goal of nuclear disarmament. Nuclear disarmament and extended deterrent commitments are not compatible, whatever the expanded roles for conventional munitions.

Last but not least, the United States today faces the prospect of extending deterrence and security assurances in a regional political environment in which the governing elites must pay increasing attention to publics which do not necessarily share their leaders' enthusiasm for American protection.^[29] This is an issue that cannot be managed by the NPR drafters, but it is nevertheless an uncertainty that may reduce the utility of extended deterrence in the Gulf before the erosion of the nuclear stockpile.

About the Author

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