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Extended Deterrence: The U.S. Credibility Gap in the Middle East

A recent UN report recently warned that "[w]e are approaching a point at which the erosion of the nonproliferation regime could become irreversible and result in a cascade of proliferation."[1] One major challenge to the nonproliferation regime appearing on the strategic horizon is the likely development of an Iranian nuclear capability, which could spark a wave of proliferation throughout the Middle Eastern region. With this in mind, can U.S. nuclear, conventional, and missile defense capabilities help bolster the security of U.S. allies against the threats posed by Iranian nuclear proliferation?

In addition to deterring its own adversaries, the U.S. nuclear arsenal has in the past played a vital but often overlooked role of reassuring U.S. allies against their adversaries. This assurance was a key tool in preventing nuclear proliferation among allies in the European and Asian theaters during the Cold War, despite the threat posed by the nuclear capabilities of their enemies. In today's security environment, assurance remains an important policy objective for the U.S. arsenal. The 2002 Nuclear Posture Review states that "U.S. nuclear forces will continue to provide assurance to security partners…. This assurance can serve to reduce the incentives for friendly countries to acquire nuclear weapons of their own to deter such threats and circumstances."[2] Will this strategy work in practice?

In the Asian theater, extended deterrence has been effective, and the United States possesses some decent options for ensuring its effectiveness in the future. The long-standing commitment of the United States to the survival of democratic states in the region, reinforced by security treaties with Japan and South Korea, has created a great deal of U.S. political credibility in the region. This political credibility, combined with U.S. military capabili-

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ties, could be employed to deter the North Korean threat and assure U.S. allies in the region, thereby reducing the chance that they will respond to Pyongyang by building their own nuclear weapons program. The U.S. political commitment to its allies in Asia has been and remains robust, bolstered by the U.S. troop presence in Japan and South Korea for the past 50 years. This remains true despite the drawdown of U.S. forces in the Asian theater. Furthermore, should allies begin to doubt U.S. nuclear assurances, steps can be taken to reinforce the policy's credibility. As such, despite the major challenges presented by Pyongyang's nuclear declaration in February 2005, it is reasonably likely that East Asian allies will continue to choose to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella well into the future rather than set off a regional nuclear domino effect.

U.S. relationships in the Middle East, however, have a strikingly different character, more akin to hesitant engagement than to Washington's well-established partnerships in Asia. A rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism, coupled with growing anti-U.S. sentiment, has strained these tenuous relations. As then–Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton recently stated, "Iranian nuclear capabilities would change the perceptions of the military balance in the region and could pose serious challenges to the [United States] in terms of deterrence and defense."[3] One such challenge is the prospect of multiple nuclear powers emerging in an already volatile Middle East. The outcome of this scenario depends in part on the capacity and credibility of U.S. strategic capabilities, including the nuclear deterrent. Ultimately, if key "nuclear dominos" in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, decide that U.S. security guarantees are insufficient, they may be tempted to acquire their own nuclear weapons. A U.S. extended deterrent policy in the Middle East would lack credibility, not due to a lack of physical capability or presence in the region, but rather as a result of the fragility of U.S. relations with its allies in the region, creating a uniquely dangerous situation.

The Iranian Threat

The threat of an Iranian nuclear capability is worrisome enough in its own right. Since its inception, the regime has consistently denounced the United States and "Western immorality" and has criticized other states in the region as being hostages to Western influence. Iran has sought to export Islamic revolution throughout the Middle East and continues to support terrorism. Adding a nuclear component to this dangerous mix would present an even more difficult challenge.

Despite the regime's insistence that it is developing a peaceful nuclear program, facts on the ground cast doubt on this assertion. For example,

Iran sits on a wealth of oil and gas reserves that are cheaper to exploit than nuclear energy. Established facts about Iran's nuclear complex reinforce the belief that its nuclear program is not peaceful. The regime has taken pains to hide many of its nuclear activities, only acknowledging them when exposed by opposition groups. These concealed sites, such as an apparent enrichment facility at Natanz, are located in hardened, underground facilities. Additionally, the infrastructure appears to be strategically dispersed, separating research, manufacturing, and power generation facilities. In effect, this makes Iran's nuclear capabilities very difficult to target, both diplomatically and militarily. The Iranians have even constructed some of their nuclear sites in urban areas, presumably in an attempt to dissuade attack by placing large numbers of civilians in close proximity to their nuclear resources. Satellite photos taken in 2002[4] appear to reveal that, when fully operational, the Natanz site may be able to produce enough fissile material for up to 25–30 nuclear weapons.[5] This enrichment process may have already begun: in 2004, International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors found traces of highly enriched uranium on Iranian centrifuges.

> The U.S. nuclear arsenal has reassured allies against their adversaries.

Moreover, Iran appears to have built or be building the capability to produce both highly enriched uranium and plutonium. In 2002 a heavy-water facility was discovered at Arak, west of Tehran. Heavy water is used in the production of plutonium, creating another avenue for the production of fissile material that could be used in a nuclear device. Either way, it is worth remembering that the "peaceful purposes" justification of a nuclear infrastructure has been offered previously by Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea—all of which subsequently acquired their own nuclear weapons capability.

There are a host of possible motivations behind Iran's proliferation efforts, including the desire to achieve strategic self-sufficiency, acquire regional status, challenge U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf region, deter Israel, and counter an erosion of Iranian conventional capabilities.[6] The 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War resulted in severe damage to these capabilities. Iran lost some 50–60 percent of its land-based conventional forces, and its surviving equipment has since experienced significant wear resulting from harsh climate conditions and insufficient funding. Arms imports currently constitute about 35–50 percent of what would be necessary to modernize Iranian forces. Although Iran's conventional capability is minimal compared

to that of the United States, it is still robust compared with other states in the region.[7]

Should Iran acquire a nuclear capability, it possesses two primary mechanisms through which to deliver a weapon. One is the roughly 120,000-strong Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRG),[8] which acts as a security apparatus for the Iranian regime. It is also the primary instrument through which Iran conducts asymmetric warfare, including terrorist sponsorship, and has been a mechanism for exporting the Islamic revolution to other countries. As such, it has been linked to conflicts in Lebanon, Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and southern Iraq, making it a strategic threat to most countries in the region. The deterioration of Iran's conventional capabilities after the Iran-Iraq War made such asymmetric, guerrilla strategies appealing as they allow Iran to pursue its national interests and influence events in the region while still retaining a veneer of deniability.

In the Asian theater, extended deterrence has been reasonably effective.

Iran's second potential method of delivery is the Shahab series of ballistic missiles. The Shahab-1 and -2 missiles are capable of reaching U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as some of the smaller Gulf states and Saudi Arabia.[9] The Shahab-3 is capable of hitting targets in Israel and Egypt.[10] In 2004, Iran tested a space-launch vehicle, described as an intercontinental ballistic missile "in disguise."[11] The technologies used in the space launch could be used to produce an Iranian missile capable of reaching targets in Europe and across the Middle East.[12] Rumors among Israeli sources also suggest that Iran is developing a new class of Shahab missile capable of reaching 4,900–5,000 kilometers. Perhaps most worrisome, newly elected Ukrainian president Viktor Yuschenko recently confirmed that the previous regime sold nuclear-capable strategic missiles to Iran.[13] If these missiles enter the Iranian arsenal, the regime would be able to threaten U.S. troops in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as all major U.S. allies in the region.

A nuclear Iran also presents the possibility of covert or terrorist use of nuclear weapons as well as an overt deterrent capability. The former prospect is especially worrisome, as Tehran could target the U.S. homeland and its allies through these means without relying on its ballistic missiles. U.S. allies in the region would likely feel this threat even more ardently. Given the potential range of the Shahab ballistic missiles, as well as the extensive reach of the IRG, including its connections throughout the Arab world, the perceived threat that a nuclear Iran would pose to allies in the region could

be enough to reopen their own debates on possible responses, including nuclear options.

Regional Perceptions and Responses

Besides the possibility of a nuclear Iran, two other major features looming in the Middle Eastern security landscape have a direct impact on overall threat perceptions: the undeclared Israeli nuclear deterrent and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The reality of Israel's superior capabilities has always been a bitter pill for Arab nations to swallow. From the Arab perspective, defeats suffered during the various Arab-Israeli wars and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts have served to reinforce the threat from Israel. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the increasing prominence of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, with its anti-Zionist doctrines, creates a theological base for its anger over the Israeli deterrent. In Egypt, despite the Camp David accords, relations with Israel have always been tense, with an anti-Israeli sentiment permeating all levels of Egyptian society. President Husni Mubarak has only visited Israel once since assuming power in 1982, and "I Hate Israel" was a number-one hit song in Egypt as recently as 2001.[14]

A U.S. extended deterrent in the Middle East, however, lacks credibility.

This lack of parity has been tolerable because Israel has kept its nuclear capability opaque while Egypt and Saudi Arabia have supported creating a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East. The emergence of a nuclear Iran would conceivably tempt Israel to declare its nuclear capabilities openly, as it would undoubtedly complicate the tension between Israel and its neighbors and would be regarded as a very serious threat to the viability of the Israeli state itself. Since the Islamic Revolution, one of Iran's primary foreign policy goals has been Israel's elimination. To that end, Iran has essentially conducted a "war by proxy," using terrorist groups such as Hizballah and Hamas in addition to its own IRG forces to achieve this aim. Israeli policymakers would likely be confronted with the challenge of devising a deterrent policy that addressed both overt attacks from Shahab missiles as well as covert methods of delivery. It is within this context that Israel might choose to forgo its policy of nuclear ambiguity. Israel may consider an overt Iranian deterrent too dire a threat to continue its opacity policy, despite the possibility of sending dangerous shockwaves throughout the region and creating "immeasurable pressure" for states in the Arab world to reverse their nuclear policies.[15]

Under Saddam, Iraq had traditionally played the role of regional counterweight to Iran. Thus, the second feature in the security landscape—Saddam's ouster—dissolved that regional balance, leaving Iran somewhat less constrained in the region and making the possibility of a nuclear Iran even more problematic.[16] More recently, this shift was reinforced by the election of a legitimate Shi'a government in Iraq. For Sunni-dominated countries in the region such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the trends in Iraq run the risk of emboldening their own Shi'a minority populations. Ultimately, through instruments such as the IRG, this could strengthen Iranian influence in these states' internal affairs, which could make the possibility of covert delivery of a nuclear device a major concern.

External factors, however, are not the sole sources of motivation behind nuclear proliferation. Domestic circumstances must also be considered. Nuclear capability can bolster a regime by signaling its strength to its population. In some ways, this strategy has worked for President Gen. Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan and even for Kim Jong-il in North Korea. The Saudis—or for that matter the Egyptians—cannot have missed this lesson. Both countries face domestic unrest, fuelled in part by Islamic extremism, with potentially disastrous implications for their governments. Both states possess the financial resources necessary to undertake a nuclear program, and Egypt also possesses the technical capability. How would Saudi Arabia and Egypt respond to the development of a nuclear and regionally dominant Iran, given their internal turmoil, fears about Israel's program, concerns over maintaining regional status, and an increasingly precarious security environment?

Saudi Arabia

According to one line of argument, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would not build its own nuclear weapons because the regime is burdened by other demands. The acquisition of a nuclear capability would be too difficult and too expensive and would greatly jeopardize Saudi relations with the United States. As a result, their military posture has arguably been and will remain defensive in nature. Although this argument may have been true in the past, especially before the Iraqi regional counterweight was eliminated, the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran would shake Saudi perceptions of their regional security environment. As former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas M. Freeman notes, "Senior Saudi officials have said privately that, if and when Iran acknowledges having, or is discovered to have, actual nuclear warheads, Saudi Arabia would feel compelled to acquire a deterrent stockpile."[17] Some form of nuclear capability would be the most effective way to restore a fragile regional balance of power.[18]

Historically, Saudi Arabia, the Sunni keeper of the Muslim holy sites, has viewed itself as the leader of the Islamic world. This role is disputed by Iran which, as the guardian of the Islamic revolution and, until recently, the only Shi'a country in the region, claims this leadership role for itself. Historically, tensions between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims have often bred competition, as well as violence. Each sect finds the other's interpretation of Islam difficult to accept, and positions today appear to be rehardening as increasingly conservative elements rise in prominence. Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been especially tense since Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979. While propagating its radicalism around the Muslim world, Iranian leaders saw the House of Saud as a corrupt monarchy that should be overthrown. This corruption was all the more offensive because the major Muslim holy sites are located in Saudi Arabia. Largely in reaction to the Islamic revolution and the ideals being spread by the Iranian regime, Saudi Arabia openly supported Saddam during the Iran-Iraq War. As Iran primarily retaliated through the IRG, fears emerged that Iran would work through the Shi'a minority population in Saudi Arabia to incite instability and foment an insurrection. In fact, the IRG was linked by U.S. intelligence experts to surreptitious activity including terrorist bombings through the annual Hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca, as well as the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing.

A nuclear Iran would shake Saudi perceptions of their regional security environment.

After the Iranian election of President Muhammad Khatami in 1997, relations between the two countries began to improve. Conventional wisdom at the time held that the forces of moderation in Iran would make the Islamic Republic a more reliable, less aggressive partner in the region. Limited cooperation began in several areas, including oil production and eventually on Afghanistan's reconstruction. Yet, this rapprochement should not be mistaken for a diminished threat perception in Riyadh, especially as more conservative elements within Iran have emerged to sideline Khatami's efforts.

An Iranian nuclear bomb would further upset the balance of power between the two countries because of Saudi Arabia's essentially poor conventional capabilities. What is already a troublesome imbalance would become overwhelming. Despite spending staggering sums of money on defense throughout the 1990s, the kingdom has not produced real military capability in part due to poor choices in arms acquisition as well as a general failure to focus on strategic planning and specific mission roles.[19] Most importantly, the sheer size of Saudi Arabia coupled with its small population renders

the physical defense of its territory extremely difficult. The Saudi royal family is still haunted by the Iraqi incursions into the kingdom's territory during the 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Israel's opaque deterrent has proved defensive in nature, which has over time led to Saudi Arabia's uneasy de facto acceptance of Israel's nuclear status. Although a nuclear Iran could cause Israel to reconsider its nuclear ambiguity and create strong pressure in Saudi Arabia to acquire its own deterrent vis-à-vis Israel, Iran presents a set of unique challenges that would undoubtedly cause apprehension in the kingdom independent of its concerns over Israel. Iranian connections with Shi'a Muslims in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, coupled with its proven ability to conduct proxy wars, create a dangerous and destabilizing combination. Iran also possesses formidable naval capabilities in the Strait of Hormuz (the "bottleneck" in shipments into and out of the Persian Gulf) that could threaten Saudi strategic interests, specifically, its ability to export oil. Iran has recently moved to consolidate its position in the strait by building a power plant and runway on the three islands in the strait that are the subject of an ongoing territorial dispute with the United Arab Emirates.[20] Within this context, it is easy to envision an Iran that would feel greatly emboldened toward its neighbors and even the United States if it possessed a nuclear capability. Despite the recent rapprochement between the two countries, Iran could ultimately prove to be an even greater strategic threat to Saudi Arabia than was Saddam's Iraq.

Fears about Saudi nuclear capabilities stem from their ability to purchase them.

Saudi Arabia signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1988 and to date appears to have adhered to its terms, although it has not agreed to the Additional Protocol or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Beyond the creation in 1988 of an Atomic Energy Research Institute, the kingdom has not engaged in any overt nuclear activities. It does not possess any nuclear power plants or related facilities that might develop indigenous nuclear expertise. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has had a somewhat ambiguous nuclear history.

Fears about Saudi Arabia's nuclear activities tend to stem not from the Saudis' domestic nuclear expertise, but rather from their ability to purchase these capabilities. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia chose to strengthen its defensive capabilities and signal its independence from the United States by purchasing an undisclosed (although estimated to be around 50) number of CSS-2 missiles from China. U.S. fears at the time centered on concerns that

Saudi Arabia had chosen to acquire a nuclear deterrent, because CSS-2s are "basically junk"[21] when tipped conventionally. It had also purchased the missiles without consulting the United States, and U.S. personnel have never been permitted to visit any of the sites associated with Saudi Arabia's CSS-2s.

Saudi Arabia has recently explored possible replacements for their aging CSS-2 missiles. A report in *The Guardian* in 2003 revealed that Saudi Arabia was circulating a strategy document that outlined three nuclear options for the kingdom: acquire a nuclear capability as a deterrent, maintain or enter into an alliance with an existing nuclear power that would offer protection, or try to reach a regional agreement on having a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East.[22] Although the Saudi monarchy vehemently denied allegations that the kingdom was even contemplating a nuclear option, subsequent reports have suggested that this review did indeed take place.[23]

Could Saudi Arabia be hedging its options? Despite suspicions about its nonproliferation commitments, the kingdom has recently begun talks with the IAEA to join the Small Quantities Protocol, which is now recognized as a challenging NPT loophole.[24] Furthermore, concerns have arisen that Saudi Arabia might purchase a strategic capability from Pakistan. Saudi-Pakistani nuclear links have, in fact, been strengthening. The only foreign visitors whom Pakistan has allowed into its nuclear facilities have been Saudi officials, and some even suspect that Saudi Arabia helped fund Pakistan's nuclear program. Details have also emerged that A. Q. Khan made several trips during the 1990s to Saudi Arabia while peddling his nuclear wares.[25] Pakistan vehemently denies that any nuclear linkages with Saudi Arabia exist, but such demonstrated linkages have generated legitimate concern that Pakistan might sell a nuclear capability or even extend its own nuclear umbrella to Saudi Arabia.[26]

Egypt

Observers of Egyptian politics have at times argued that the emergence of an Egyptian nuclear deterrent is unlikely. Egypt's commitment to the NPT has made it a strong advocate for the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East. Furthermore, if Egypt acquired a nuclear capability, it would severely damage its relations with the United States, which provides Egypt with more than $50 billion annually in military assistance. Nevertheless, several important factors do suggest a need to consider the potential for Egyptian nuclear acquisition in response to a nuclear Iran. As in the Saudi case, an Iranian nuclear capability would jeopardize Egypt's status as a major regional power; and Egypt, as stated by Amra Moussa, "will do whatever it takes to maintain its position in the Middle East and the Arab world."[27]

Egyptian-Iranian relations have always been strained. The two states have maintained very limited contact after they broke diplomatic ties in 1979 following Egypt's peace agreement with Israel, its offer of sanctuary to the deposed Iranian shah, and later its backing of Saddam during the Iran-Iraq War. In 1981, Iranian support of the Muslim Brotherhood culminated in the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. In a show of extraordinary diplomatic gall, Iran's regime went so far as to name a street in downtown Tehran after the former president's assassin.[28]

An Iranian bomb could lead Cairo to give up its ambitions for a nuclear-free region.

As was the case with Saudi Arabia, Egyptian relations with Iran began to improve with Khatami's election, but suggestions of a rapprochement seem misdirected. Tehran consistently refused Cairo's request to extradite Mustafa Hamzah, the accused mastermind behind the 1995 attempted assassination of Mubarak in Addis Ababa.[29] Although he was eventually extradited to Egypt in December 2004, Iran maintains that it was not behind this move.[30] In late 2004, Egyptian authorities accused an IRG member of recruiting an Egyptian citizen to carry out activities "contrary to Egyptian interests."[31] In the aftermath of these two incidents, some observers have been left skeptical about the prospects of the Egyptian-Iranian relationship thawing.[32]

Irrespective of the state of the relationship with Iran, Egypt's long-standing nuclear policy has been to support the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East with the goal of dismantling the Israeli deterrent and preventing nuclear acquisition by other states in the region. Consequently, an Iranian bomb, taken in conjunction with the existence of Israeli nuclear weapons, would fundamentally alter the region's strategic landscape, potentially leading Cairo to give up its ambitions for a nuclear-weapon-free region and start to fend for itself. In October 1998, Mubarak remarked that, "[i]f the time comes when we need nuclear weapons, we will not hesitate…. Every country is preparing for itself a deterrent weapon that will preserve its integrity and its existence."[33] If the Saudis were to seek a nuclear weapon, it would further compound the situation.

Egypt has always possessed both chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction and has, in the past, dabbled in nuclear weapons capability acquisition.[34] Egypt founded its Atomic Energy Authority in 1955, but began focusing on civilian applications of nuclear energy and eventually gave up most of its nuclear program as a part of its 1979 peace accord with Israel. Instead, Egypt relied on security assistance from the United States to create

conventional parity vis-à-vis Israel. It has maintained an incipient nuclear power program since the time of the peace accord with Israel, today comprising two small research reactors.[35] Budgetary constraints, however, have appeared to be the major constraint on the program's size, not necessarily a lack of nuclear ambition.

These budgetary constraints may now be changing, and Egypt has likely maintained the expertise necessary to acquire a nuclear-weapon capability if it so desired.[36] Indeed, Mubarak stated as much in 1998 when he said, "We have a nuclear reactor at Inshas, and we have very capable experts."[37] Establishing a nuclear power station with a reactor large enough to divert processed uranium or plutonium for clandestine purposes could signal the beginning of a hedging strategy in case more regional nuclear powers, such as Iran, emerged. In fact, in 1996, Egypt's minister of electricity and energy reported that the country would begin building its first nuclear power plant at El-Dabaa by 2012.[38] It has also been suggested that another reactor may be constructed in 2010–2012.[39] Given these technical constraints, acquiring a nuclear capability would likely take some time, yet is certainly not impossible.

U.S. Credibility in the Gulf

Taking into consideration the potential for Egypt and Saudi Arabia to proliferate, could the United States assure Cairo and Riyadh, dissuading them from building their own nuclear weapons, by extending the U.S. nuclear umbrella? Assurance gained through a reasonably sound extended deterrence policy relies on two primary factors: capability and credibility. Although the United States arguably possesses the physical capability to deter the Iranian regime on behalf of Gulf/Near Eastern states, whether it has sufficient political credibility needed to assure its regional allies is not clear. Without this credibility, states in the region may yet be tempted to acquire their own nuclear guarantee.

What does it mean to be credible? Essentially, allies must be confident that the United States would defend them and their interests in the event of an act of aggression. This involves an unambiguous obligation, created through physical presence and underpinned by political commitment, to the survival of these states and their regimes. Yet, as Cold War experience taught, establishing credibility can be difficult. France, for example, ultimately decided that U.S. security assurances were insufficient and decided to acquire its own nuclear deterrent.

Does the United States have credibility in the Middle East? It is possible to argue that the scope of U.S. involvement in the region illustrates the depth and therefore the credibility of its commitment to regional security. Its signifi-

cant petroleum interests also underpin the strength of the U.S. commitment to the region. Within this context then, it can be argued that extended deterrence could play a significant role in assuring regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The devil, however, is always in the details. When it comes to the nuts and bolts of an extended deterrence strategy, the concept begins to lose its coherence. 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. In the Middle East, building a sufficiently compelling case would be difficult to accomplish.

U.S. troops are no longer present in Saudi Arabia or Egypt in significant numbers.

Cold War examples provide compelling insight into the problem. During that era, the starting point for the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent in Europe and Asia was the forward deployment of ground troops, which signaled to enemy regimes that an attack on allied nations would also be an attack on the United States. Perhaps more importantly, the forward deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe and Asia reinforced these ground troops by creating a "use it or lose it" threat of escalation. Essentially, in the event of an outbreak of hostilities, nuclear weapons would either be used or lost to an invading force. Through these policies and force deployments, a credible threat of escalation was created. Adversaries could easily envision a conventional conflict leading to nuclear war. In the Asian context, although U.S. nuclear weapons are no longer forward deployed in the region, the strong ties the United States maintains with its democratic allies help boost the credibility of U.S. assurances. Ultimately, however, should the credibility of this assurance fall into question, the United States could reasonably think about redeploying nuclear weapons there because of these strong, historic connections. There would be a high probability of the security and safety of U.S. nuclear weapons in these countries because of their stability.

Although today the United States maintains a powerful forward conventional presence in the Middle East, U.S. troops are no longer present in Saudi Arabia or Egypt in significant numbers, nor are they likely to be deployed there in the near future. The rise of anti-U.S. sentiment in the region has made it very difficult to field the kind of highly visible troops that might confirm the U.S. commitment, both because these troops are terrorist targets and because their presence helps foment instability within these countries. Even in Iraq, in which the United States has staked a great strategic interest, the

presence of ground troops has led to the perception by some that the U.S. presence is occupying, rather than liberating and supporting, Iraq.

Given the difficulty of fielding troops in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, it is inconceivable that the United States would deploy nuclear weapons in these countries. Saudi Arabia and Egypt are both countries facing a degree of domestic unrest that might possibly lead to the eventual overthrow of their regimes. In the Saudi case, if the House of Saud were deposed, its likely successor would be a radical Wahhabi regime that would almost by definition be anti-American. Even if the current regimes remain in power, it would be difficult to guarantee the safety and security of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, where the possibility of terrorists gaining access to these weapons would be much greater than in Europe or Asia.

Politically, the Saudi royal family would have significant reason to question whether the United States possessed the willingness necessary to follow through on their extended deterrence policy. The September 11 attacks led to U.S. frustration with the Saudis, especially because many members of the royal family tacitly approved of the extremists' actions and because 15 of the 19 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia. Revelations that the Saudi monarchy continues to propagate anti-U.S. sentiment has aggravated this frustration. A study by Freedom House has confirmed that the Saudi regime is behind a wealth of anti-American, anti-Semitic literature in mosques across the United States.[40] Would the United States really come to the aid of such an ambiguous ally? Even if it did, would U.S. public opinion sustain these policies in the long term?

These direct questions of political commitment might not feature as prominently in Cairo's decisionmaking, but they are far from inconceivable. Politically, the United States has expressed a clear commitment to Egypt. The president's singling out of Egypt in the State of the Union address and the administration's stated prioritization of democracy promotion, however, might cause Mubarak or his successor at least to question whether the United States would come to the aid of an undemocratic Egypt.

Saudi and Egyptian concern about the U.S.-Israeli connection could further undermine any U.S. offer of a nuclear umbrella. Both states consider the Israeli deterrent a direct threat and thus would likely also consider Israeli capabilities when making decisions about their security needs in response to an Iranian nuclear weapon. Beyond Tehran, states in the region would have good reason to question whether the United States would come to their aid in the event of an Israeli attack. Regardless of how Saudi Arabia and Egypt decided to respond to Israel's nuclear program in the past, the combined threat of Israel and Iran in a region without an Iraqi counterweight could change Riyadh's and Cairo's calculus today.

New Policy Directions

The emergence of a nuclear Iran would undoubtedly send shockwaves through the region that could result in a nuclear domino effect. Therein lies the crux of the problem: If Saudi Arabia were to follow Iran's proliferation route, that would again change the calculations of every other state in the region in a cumulative and potentially dangerous manner. Continuing with Egypt, and with other dominos such as Turkey and Syria poised to fall, the proliferation challenge in the Middle East is uniquely daunting. Perhaps most worrisome is that the United States is left, at present, with few good options in the region to thwart this dangerous trajectory.

Unlike in Asia, where the U.S. deterrent umbrella is more credible, in the Middle East the Iranian proliferation problem presents a different set of challenges. Not only do Iranian connections with terrorist organizations significantly raise fears of nuclear terrorism, but state-based proliferation is more dangerous in this already volatile region. Both concerns present significant, long-term challenges to U.S. security and involvement in the region, especially as extended deterrence may not succeed in assuring regional allies.

Although efforts today focus on preventing Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons, the United States and the international community must also consider contingency planning to manage the regional implications of a nuclear Iran, particularly for U.S. allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. As Muhammad Abdel Salam of the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo writes, "No one has made a statement on where they stand on the Iran crisis. No Arab officials are holding talks in Tehran, although major European countries have sent emissaries to the Iranians. No Arab officials are in Washington to discuss the ramifications of the situation. In a nutshell, no policy exists."[41] Yet, forward thinking is necessary now in order to prevent rash nuclear decisions in the future.

Because extending the U.S. deterrent umbrella to assure allies in the region would be difficult to accomplish, another body, such as the United Nations, could play a role in mitigating the pressure for states in the region to acquire their own nuclear capabilities. One option might be the extension of positive security assurances to all states in the region by all permanent members of the Security Council. Yet, even this strategy's credibility would be difficult to establish. The U.S. presence in the Security Council would make states such as Syria less likely to trust UN assurances. Alternatively, the issue of containing nuclear dynamics in the Middle East may be an issue to be addressed in the context of the transatlantic relationship. France and the United Kingdom, each with extensive histories in the region, may be

able to reinforce the credibility of an extended deterrent security guarantee. The possibility of a European extended deterrent in this region is certainly worth considering.

Another possible political solution could come from the successful reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan. Once stable, these two states could help counterbalance Iran and prevent the Iranian regime, as well as domestic elements within Saudi Arabia and Egypt, from criticizing the West as being "un-Islamic." This could lead to a more positive reception toward U.S. troops in the region and thus enhance the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent. Ultimately, the spread of truly democratic regimes in the region could give the United States more allies and partners to help contain the Iranian threat.

The emergence of a nuclear Iran could result in a regional nuclear domino effect.

What can be done to mitigate these temptations toward proliferation in response to an Iranian bomb? The international community will first have to make it absolutely clear that a state that has abrogated its NPT commitments will be treated as a pariah state. Presenting that stark option to Iran—renounce its weapons program or face international condemnation—could help convince the Iranians that their nuclear choices have made them less secure. It would also warn other states in the region that the consequences of violating NPT obligations are simply not worth the risk.

A combination of economic incentives such as political and increased military aid may work to diffuse Egypt's and Saudi Arabia's desires for an independent deterrent. In this respect, U.S. policy toward Libya, which recently renounced its nuclear weapons program, may be instructive for other countries in the region. Libya was to receive economic benefits for renouncing its nuclear weapons program. Whether or not other regional states perceive that Libya has actually received these benefits may enhance or reduce the U.S. ability to make these offers in the future. It should be noted, however, that national security considerations often outweigh economic ones.

Furthermore, U.S. policymakers need to consider what capabilities would be required to ameliorate Iranian nuclear proliferation. U.S. efforts will need to focus on managing the emerging nuclear dynamics to prevent any use of nuclear weapons in the region. This may involve ensuring that the United States can effectively deter Iranian activity against its troops or facilities. It will be important to deter Iran directly even if it cannot be accomplished through extended deterrence. Transformed U.S. nuclear capabilities that can hold Iranian underground facilities at risk may be a part of that solu-

tion. To assure Iran's neighbors, robust theater missile defenses could be even more useful.

Additionally, should this proliferation domino effect occur, ensuring the safety and security of nuclear facilities and fissile material, preventing arms races, and assisting with creating effective command and control will all have to be components of a broader U.S. nuclear security strategy. In the wake of the Pakistani and Indian nuclear tests, U.S. officials and nongovernmental organizations worked under the radar to teach, to the extent possible, what was required of these states in order to be responsible nuclear powers. Considering that both Saudi Arabia and Egypt are NPT signatories, however, if they decide to acquire nuclear capabilities, this kind of assistance may not be feasible due to the treaty's constraints.

An Iranian nuclear weapon could prove more dangerous than North Korea.

Iranian proliferation therefore presents a series of unique challenges to the Middle Eastern region and the international community as a whole. Ultimately, an Iranian nuclear weapon could prove more dangerous than that of North Korea because an Iranian nuclear capability creates the potential for regional proliferation beyond Iran. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and others, in the face of a nuclear Iran and myriad other regional and domestic challenges, may choose to acquire their own deterrents. The United States at present has few good options for reassuring allies in the Middle East and cannot give compelling reasons to these countries to persuade them from pursuing an independent course of action. These consequences must be considered carefully now in order to shape better policy options for the future.

Notes

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