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Deterring a Nuclear Iran

The Devil in the Details

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There are many different potential challenges to living with a nuclear Iran. A number lie in the broad realm of strategy or even grand strategy: preventing further proliferation, maintaining the stability of the region, and forestalling any shift in the balance of power toward Iran. The tactics and mechanics of deterring a nuclear Iran will present their own difficulties that must also be addressed, and addressed in a concrete and immediate fashion. The logic of nuclear weapons, as Bernard Brodie first described it at the dawn of the nuclear era, is certainly compelling and lends a considerable amount of strength to nuclear deterrence.[1] But as numerous Cold War crises demonstrated, such logic can be undermined—potentially fatally—by faulty implementation, poor communication, misperception, malign intent, and excessive ambiguity or excessive specificity. Getting deterrence right between two responsible, mostly status quo powers that knew each other fairly well—like the United States and Soviet Union—was hard enough and nearly resulted in tragedy on several occasions. Doing it with a country like Iran—whose political system is utterly opaque and unpredictable even to its own members—or between two countries like Iran and America—whose entire history has been one of constant misunderstanding—is going to be harder still.

A preliminary exploration of some of the most salient military-technical aspects of a deterrence regime should Iran acquire a nuclear weapons capability in the near future necessarily raises more questions than it answers. Even the answers it provides should be considered tentative and merely a starting point for additional study and debate.

Red Lines

A logical place to start any exploration of the technical requirements of deterring a nuclear Iran is with the issue of "red lines." The purpose of laying down red lines to Iran (and potentially vice versa) is to make clear to Tehran what actions on its part would trigger an American military response, conventional or nuclear. As the lessons of the Cold War and experiences with North Korea demonstrate, clear red lines are absolutely crucial. Moreover, any discussion of red lines inevitably forces a discussion on wider issues related to American goals, priorities, and capabilities. After all, when confronting a nuclear-armed adversary, the United States should only threaten the use of force when it really means to use force and when capable of employing it. Defining red lines can thus provoke a useful debate about these larger topics.

The most obvious red line the United States should lay down is that any Iranian use of conventional or nuclear force beyond its own borders will be met with whatever means the United States requires to defeat it. This is the heart of deterrence (really extended deterrence) and thus should be an unimpeachable red line. The United States cannot allow Iran to employ force or the threat of force against its neighbors, and Tehran needs to understand that Washington will prevent it from doing so using all means at its disposal, potentially including nuclear weapons.

A second issue that requires the articulation of a red line is the possibility of Iranian transfer of nuclear material or nuclear weapons to a third party, particularly one of the many terrorist groups Tehran supports. Here there are two possible approaches. The first would be a more minimalist ap-

proach in which Washington would declare that if any terrorist group associated with Tehran ever employed nuclear weapons or nuclear materials in an attack anywhere in the world, the United States would retaliate against Iran—and would not feel bound to produce evidence that could stand up in a court of law. The other would be a more maximalist approach in which Washington would announce that credible intelligence of even the *transfer* of nuclear weaponry or nuclear material to a third party would be sufficient to provoke a massive American response against Iran. The minimalist approach has the advantage of confining a U.S. response to retaliation only after Iran and its allies have conducted a horrific attack themselves, but leaves open the possibility that Iran may believe that it could so obfuscate its involvement that the United States would mistakenly blame another group or country. The latter approach puts the onus on Tehran and gives the Iranians an incentive to never do anything that might create even the impression of such a transfer. However, it might put the United States in the position of acting on false intelligence or, more likely, of not acting based solely on intelligence of a transfer and so undermining the red line if the Iranians ever learned the truth.

Another important threat that the United States and its allies may face from a nuclear Iran is that Tehran may believe that its nuclear shield will protect it from *all* retaliation by the United States (both conventional and nuclear) as long as it does not cross the red lines articulated above related to its use of force or transfer of nuclear material. This may create the impression in Iranian minds that the unconventional realm—subversion, nonnuclear terrorism, insurgencies, and the like—are all fair game. Moreover, Tehran might calculate that Washington would never respond with nuclear weapons to a nonnuclear terrorist attack or insurgency. The Iranians might further assume that the United States would not even retaliate with conventional forces because of the risk of escalation to a nuclear exchange, and that therefore they could be more aggressive in employing asymmetric forms of warfare. To deter Iran from more aggressively pursuing unconventional wars against the United States and its allies, Washington might want to convey to Tehran that asymmetric warfare on its part will be met by disproportionate responses, such as supporting insurgent and separatist groups inside Iran, undermining Iran's currency, and mounting relentless cyberattacks against Iran as examples. Of course, the essential element to this deterrent threat is that the United States will need to be able to make good on it, and the Iranians need to believe that Washington is ready and able to do so.

Treaty Arrangements

Although the record is somewhat mixed, on balance, the history of the Cold War suggests that having a regional military alliance of some kind that formally includes the United States would help contain a nuclear Iran. Several historical examples suggest themselves immediately:

- The existence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) treaties provided a legal basis for the deployment of American forces that mitigated the domestic political costs of American unpopularity for the regional states. At various times the United States was deeply unpopular among European publics, but the sanctity of the NATO treaty effectively eliminated any move to evict the U.S. military altogether.

- The NATO and SEATO treaties precluded (or at least greatly diminished) the ability of the USSR to create political rifts between the United States and its regional allies that could have eliminated the American presence from Soviet borders.

- Moreover, NATO and SEATO provided the countries of western Europe and East Asia with an excuse, a set of incentives, and political cover to work together and on one another's behalf in ways that might have been difficult otherwise. The core mutual interests expressed in these two treaties bound the states of western Europe and East Asia together in ways that a series of bilateral treaties with the United States never would have. Especially in the case of the Persian Gulf, where the Gulf Consortium Corporation (GCC) is largely a sham and the Gulf emirates prefer to handle their defense via bilateral ties to the United States, such a multilateral treaty could be extremely useful.

Ideally, a new treaty in the Persian Gulf region would include a stable Iraq and Turkey as well. Of course, the region already had one such treaty, the Baghdad Pact/Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which failed miserably and is largely seen as a symbol of the foolishness of trying to extend such treaty arrangements to the Middle East. While the failure of CENTO stands as a warning, it should be remembered that, nearly fifty-five years later, the region is now different, and the conditions that destroyed CENTO are no longer present.[2] Other impediments remain, however, and it is far from clear that a new treaty pact for the region is feasible. Moreover, it is almost certainly the case that the GCC states would balk at the idea of a formal regional alliance that included the United States and Iraq (a coalition that would help to deter Iran and deal with the various security issues related to Iraq itself). Consequently, the United States might have to think creatively about what such a security structure might look like if it were not such a traditional alliance.

Force Deployment and Basing

In previous American containment regimes—particularly against the USSR, Iraq, and North Korea—the deployment of American military forces on the borders of those countries was critical to deterrence. There is a rationale for doing the same toward a nuclear Iran. Deployed U.S. conventional forces could deter some conventional aggression by the target country and serve as an unmistakable guarantor of U.S. red lines. A country that might convince itself that the United States would not employ nuclear weapons in response to its occupation of a third country's land has to make a very different calculation if U.S. soldiers are likely to be killed in the process.

Moreover, scholarly work on extended deterrence has consistently found that would-be aggressors tend to only pay attention to the local balance of forces, discounting or ignoring the global balance. As when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, aggressors may recognize that the United States could ultimately defeat them, but may assume that if they can grab their prize quickly before the United States is ready, Washington will not summon the will to roll back a fait accompli (or will be blocked by other forces from doing so). Thus, preventing aggression against a third country in the

first place (the definition of extended deterrence) is best served by a strong local military presence so that the would-be aggressor never believes that it can get create such a fait accompli. This, too, argues for strong American conventional forces deployed along Iran's borders.

However, in the case of Iran there is also an inherent tension between the logic of deploying American troops around Iran's borders to bolster conventional and nuclear deterrence and the real threat from Iran. Unlike the USSR, North Korea, or Iraq, Iran poses little conventional military threat to its neighbors. Although Tehran's armed forces may be marginally more capable than most of its neighbors (Turkey excepted), its ability to project force beyond its borders is extremely limited. No one is afraid that the Iranians are going to mount an amphibious assault across the Persian Gulf that might threaten Saudi Arabia. They might be able to grab Bahrain, but a very modest American air and naval presence could deter even that. Absent major civil war in the target country, Iran's ability to conquer large swaths of Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, or the Central Asian states is extremely modest.

Instead, the most dangerous threat from Iran lies in subversion. Iran is an anti–status quo power that seeks the overthrow of all of the conservative states of the Persian Gulf region, and has attempted to engineer such overthrows on a number of occasions. Iranian intentions vary toward its other neighbors, but it rarely wishes them well and has backed a number of terrorist and insurgent groups against nearly all of them. Moreover, Iran is not nearly as concerned about Sunni-Shia divisions as many Westerners seem to believe. Tehran backs or has cooperated with Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, al-Qaeda, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Algerian GIA, and the Egyptian Gama'at—all secular or Sunni fundamentalist groups, which in some cases seek to exterminate the Shia. If a nuclear Iran decides to go on the offensive against its neighbors, either to expand its power or to break the ring of containment around it, its most likely and most potent method will be supporting domestic opposition, organized crime, terrorists, and insurgents—*not* mounting a conventional attack. Unfortunately, anti-Americanism remains both deep and wide across the regions neighboring Iran, and thus the stationing of large numbers of American troops, or even the proliferation of smaller bases, could stoke additional resentment against regional governments, creating greater opportunities for Iran to subvert America's regional allies.

Consequently, a critical consideration for the United States will be finding the right balance between just enough military force along Iran's borders to reassure Iran's neighbors and prevent an Iranian conventional move, but not so much that it undermines the legitimacy of the regime, inflames domestic sentiment against the government, or creates other internal problems that could enable Iran to help subvert and overthrow the regime. This will be a tricky balance, one that the United States has struggled with for decades—and has either gotten right or wrong depending on one's view of the growth of anti-Americanism in the region. One conclusion, however, from this seems obvious: American conventional deployments in the region ought to emphasize that air and naval forces, particularly aircraft carriers, both be present on a constant basis and available in sufficient strength to surge three to four others in case of a major conflict with Iran. Powerful American naval forces cruising offshore are the best way to square the circle of the need for an American conventional presence without undermining the legitimacy of the Gulf monarchies.

Military Assistance

The United States is the principal military partner and arms supplier to most of Iran's neighbors. At the most basic level, this set of relationships can only help bolster the containment of Iran and so should be maintained. However, Washington will have to look hard at the nature and mechanics of that cooperation to determine if it is appropriate in the changed context of trying to deter a nuclear Iran.

Iran's conventional military capabilities remain limited, even if marginally more capable than those of many of its neighbors (particularly the GCC states). Among all of Iran's neighbors, only Turkey has ever demonstrated any real aptitude for modern warfare, although it is worth keeping in mind that the Iraqi ground and air forces crushed their Iranian counterparts at the end of the Iran-Iraq War. The Iranian armed forces have improved since then, but only incrementally. This raises the first point of continued U.S. arms sales and other military assistance to Iran's neighbors: it does not take much military capability to defeat the Iranian military. Consequently, providing sophisticated weaponry to Iran's neighbors could give them just enough to defeat an Iranian attack, despite their own crippling inadequacies.

During the Persian Gulf War of 1990–91, the United States learned a valuable lesson about arms sales to the GCC states: they do not constitute a form of prepositioning for U.S. forces. Equipment in GCC inventories was often badly maintained, and the national armed forces never had any intention of parting with it so that Americans might employ it instead. Similarly, American military forces had to bring their own logistical supplies and ammunition with them as well, and were only able to rely on the Saudis for a small portion of the weaponry employed. The Saudis certainly provided fuel, but oil is not part of foreign military sales and is therefore irrelevant to this discussion. The interoperability of GCC and American forces did not count for much because the United States simply did not feel it could count on the GCC militaries for anything but the least demanding operations. Nevertheless, the long history of American arms sales to the GCC states did pay off to a lesser extent in that GCC facilities had often been designed by Americans and were designed to handle American weapons systems.

If arms sales to the region paid few dividends in terms of creating the kind of integrated military effort the United States has been seeking for sixty years, they remain important because of the sense of reciprocal commitment they have demonstrated. In Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, American military sales have always conveyed the sense that the United States and the buying nation were committed to their defense relationship. Indeed, it is worth considering the impression that would be given if a state had a defense relationship with the United States and lacked an indigenous defense industry, yet either refused to buy or was forbidden by the United States to buy American military equipment.

In addition, another aspect of foreign military sales and military cooperation that has proven useful in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East is command-and-control cooperation. The construction of large, sophisticated warning-and-control networks with U.S. assistance and an American presence

as part of their operations has greatly enhanced American situational awareness. In times of crisis, it has meant that the United States received the earliest warning of events possible. It has allowed the United States to better influence the actions of its regional allies. For thirty years, the United States has been building precisely such a network with the GCC and it has paid handsome dividends in terms of providing information about regional developments. It is a pattern that could usefully be extended to other regions bordering on Iran.

However, given the nature of the Iranian threat, useful American assistance to the region will look different from what was traditionally provided to Europe, East Asia, and even the Middle East. Given that Iran's most potent weapon is its ability to stoke internal unrest, subvert conservative regimes, and feed the flames of civil strife, U.S. assistance to the region ought to be focused on helping Iran's neighbors combat these threats. This ought to be the topic of much greater discussion but, in a nutshell, effective U.S. assistance would mean encouraging and helping the states of the region to develop more effective counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities, perhaps establishing a regional school or training facility to teach counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. Of even greater importance and difficulty, it would mean encouraging and assisting the states of the region to reform their political, economic, and social systems to eliminate the underlying grievances that give rise to the internal unrest that the Iranians attempt to inflame.[3]

Crisis Management

A final, critical issue that the United States must address if it is to deter a nuclear-armed Iran is the issue of crisis management. As noted, during the Cold War neither Washington nor Moscow wanted a war with the other, and yet the two countries came perilously close to war on a number of occasions. That they did not fall into a war was largely the product of good crisis management (much of it made up on the fly) and a bit of luck. Obviously one should not assume the same degree of luck with the Iranians, or even that the same degree of luck would be sufficient to deter Tehran short of war given the many differences between the U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Iran relationships. Consequently, a major investment in crisis management to avoid an inadvertent war with Iran once it crosses the nuclear threshold is needed.

Of greatest importance, what allowed cooler heads to prevail during the Cuban, Berlin, and Middle Eastern crises of the Cold War were the following: first, the ability of Moscow and Washington to communicate quickly and relatively easily; second, a fairly good understanding between Russia and the United States; and third, the ability of Russia and the United States to "read" each other's signals correctly. None of this has ever proven to be the case for the U.S. relationship with Iran. The history of that relationship has consistently shown that neither side understands the other well (if at all), communications are extremely difficult, and signals are invariably misread.

This is a very troubling pattern, and the United States will have to lead the way in correcting it. Establishing some kind of "hotline" would be extremely helpful, but doing so seems highly problematic given the Iranian regime's paranoia when it comes to direct contact with the U.S. government.

Greater dialogue, academic and cultural exchanges, and even military-to-military talks would all be extremely helpful in terms of building understanding on both sides. Similarly, a regional security forum at which Americans, Iranians, and all of the major regional states could regularly gather to discuss both general and immediate concerns would be helpful.[4] Such a forum might also enable both sides to work out mutually agreed upon methods of signaling that could help prevent a crisis from spiraling into a disaster.

Endnotes

1. Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1946).
2. The most important conditions that destroyed CENTO were Washington's refusal to become a formal signatory and the Iraqi revolution. We should avoid making the former mistake, and should be seeking to prevent the latter, a topic addressed later in this paper.
3. For a much lengthier discussion of why reform in the Arab world is critical to American interests, as well as how best to encourage and foster it, see Kenneth M. Pollack, *A Path Out of the Desert: A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2008).
4. This concept of a regional security architecture for the Persian Gulf is discussed in greater length in Kenneth M. Pollack, "Securing The Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 4 (July/August 2003), pp. 2–16.