

**TEHERAN'S UMBRELLA:  
EXTENDED DETERRENCE AND THE CHALLENGE OF PROLIFERATION**

7th Pan-European Conference on International Relations  
Stockholm  
September 2010

Professor Daniel Moran  
Department of National Security Affairs  
Naval Postgraduate School  
Monterey, California

The aim of the paper that follows is to stimulate discussion of the objectives and policy options that may arise from Iran's nuclear program. Given how little is known about Iran's purposes and intended capabilities, it is necessarily more of a thought-experiment than a work of scholarship. It is based on the normal range of public sources with which anyone concerned with this topic will be familiar, and more centrally on a series of "Track II" meetings in the Gulf and elsewhere, organized by myself and my colleague, James Russell, and by others who have been kind enough to invite me to participate. Those meetings were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, which says that the contents of an academic discussion may be used freely by all participants, provided the identities of other participants are not revealed. This must excuse the fact that, at some points below, I have taken up ideas first voiced by others, without giving them the credit that would normally be their due.

In any event, everything that follows is my responsibility alone. Nothing in this paper, nor in any remarks based upon it at the conference, has been reviewed or approved by any agency of the United States government.

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### Abstract

*This paper considers the concept of “extended deterrence” from the Iranian perspective, with reference to the broader policy options that Iranian nuclear weapons could be expected to support. Although it is a mistake to assume that Iran’s leadership knows exactly what advantages it is seeking through its pursuit of nuclear arms, its minimum objective must surely be to make the country secure from attack by the United States or its allies. Beyond that, Iran’s nuclear program is best understood as a continuation of its effort to develop a military posture and institutions consistent with the goals of the Iranian Revolution. In the past Iran has relied on the traditional revolutionary expedient of the armed nation, a concept that may have run its course as a tool of social mobilization, and whose military limitations have been exposed by the American campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. More recently Iran’s efforts to advance its revolutionary program have relied on proxy organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah, groups that presumably expect to benefit from the extended deterrence of a nuclear umbrella in Teheran. This paper will argue that it is unlikely that they will, however, though the fact that they may expect to is not without its perils. Nor is it likely that success in the nuclear arena will compensate sufficiently for Iran’s other deficiencies to allow it mount a more conventionally aggressive policy in the Gulf. The crucial question may ultimately be what kinds of advantages Iran can wring from the public prestige that nuclear weapons may bring. Although it may seem odd to conceive of the Iranian nuclear program as an exercise in “soft power,” this dimension cannot be discounted in appraising Teheran’s strategic outlook, nor in devising effective policies should its efforts in the nuclear arena prove successful.*

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### Extended Deterrence

The idea of extended deterrence is a product of the early Cold War. It reflected the shared concern of the nuclear Superpowers that the spread of nuclear weapons would complicate their relationship with each other, and make it more dangerous. Each accordingly declared itself willing to extend the protection of its nuclear arsenal to allies and clients. The widespread acceptance of this idea may seem surprising, because its credibility depended on the willingness of non-nuclear states to believe that their protector would expose itself to potentially mortal perils on their behalf. Nevertheless, it was widely believed that neither the US nor the USSR could tolerate the loss of prestige and credibility that would follow an unavenged nuclear attack on one of its partners. As a consequence the concept of extended deterrence proved robust. Even states for which nuclear weapons were within easy technological reach generally judged that the risk of owning them was greater than that of trusting the protection afforded by established nuclear powers.

Extended deterrence was supported by a system of security guarantees, most of which were of a familiar and traditional kind: a declared willingness by states to cooperate in each other’s defense, and to fight side-by-side in given circumstances. In the nuclear era,

however, a new form of guarantee was introduced, one that was extended not merely to friends but to rivals and adversaries as well. States known to possess nuclear weapons promised not to employ them against any that did not, in exchange for a countervailing promise that states without nuclear weapons would not attempt to obtain them. This exchange of promises lies at the heart of the nuclear non-proliferation regime established in 1968.

Nevertheless, nuclear proliferation remains a major threat to stability in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. The Cold War structure of extended deterrence was defined by the logic of nuclear confrontation. Except in a few specific contexts (e.g. the NATO alliance) it did not address conventional threats, to which some states may well regard nuclear weapons as an effective answer. Nor did it offer much comfort to states who associated the possession of nuclear weapons with prestige and influence. This perception was reinforced by the general reluctance of states with nuclear weapons to give them up. The disappearance of the Soviet Union, finally, has (perhaps paradoxically) called into question the continued credibility of the extended deterrence offered by the United States, the only country at present that is believed to be willing to employ its nuclear weapons in defense of other states. When there were two “nuclear umbrellas” it was easy (or at any rate convenient) to assume that each covered whatever the other did not. Now that there is only one, its exact extent has become uncertain, as have the conditions under which its protection might be withdrawn.

The Cold War experience suggests that extended deterrence cannot be sustained simply by declaratory statements on the part of nuclear weapons states. As between the United States and the Soviet Union, stable deterrence of the “MAD” variety proved relatively easy to achieve, once nuclear weapons had become sufficiently numerous and powerful to rule out the aggressive, “war-fighting” options that dominated nuclear planning during the Cold War’s first fifteen years or so. Even so, however, convincing junior partners that deterrence sufficient for their own security has been achieved can be more difficult. As the Cold War ground along United States engaged in a wide range of activities that helped to foster belief in the reality of its nuclear umbrella. It sought continuous, active engagement and effective consultation among its security partners, persistent military contact, cooperative planning, and a sustained conventional military presence in dozens of countries around the world. To this must be added all the diverse political, personal, and economic linkages that have characterized the Atlantic alliance and US-Japanese relations since the 1950s. Although effective extended deterrence must rest upon clear capabilities and firm policies in the nuclear area, history suggests that credible signaling of its reality demands a variety of continuous, diverse interactions across a much broader spectrum of security concerns.

### **Gulf Security**

Since the end of the Second World War the security of the Persian Gulf has been in the hands of the major oil-consuming states in the West. Their willingness to extend military protection to the region was driven by their hunger for energy, and their determination to deprive the Soviets of influence and access there. The second of these motives has disappeared—though Russia’s recent, opportunistic intervention in Georgia is a reminder that it retains substantial freedom to act in proximity to its own frontiers. The first motive, however, appears to be stronger than ever. Yet it is unclear, absent the

overarching external threat posed by the Soviets, what kinds of policies it can support on its own.

The experience of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union is, unsurprisingly, a crucial contextual element shaping American policy toward Iran's nuclear program. It is surely in this light that one must view US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's comment, in July 2009, that, if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, the American "defense umbrella" would be extended to any state it might attack with them. Although the constructive intention of this remark cannot reasonably be doubted, the responses it inspired have proven very diverse, ranging from some (on the American left) who have demanded to know why the US should be taking nuclear risks on behalf of states whose political and social practices are mostly pretty deplorable; to others (in the Arab Gulf states especially) who have wondered whether the Secretary's choice of words might not have been calculated to place limits on US commitments in the region, and perhaps even to signal its willingness to allow Iran to cross the nuclear threshold unmolested.

If nothing else, Secretary Clinton's apparent effort to reassure America's friends in the Gulf offer a lesson in the perils of public diplomacy. Why "defense umbrella," after all, and not "nuclear umbrella"? And is it not a bad idea to discuss the extent of American security guarantees in advance of Iran's actually obtaining nuclear weapons, given that such a discussion may well serve to legitimize the Iranian nuclear program in the eyes of the Iranians themselves, and perhaps of other, more neutral observers who might nevertheless wish to check American influence in the region? These are not bad questions by any means, but the fact that have been raised so forcefully in nevertheless symptomatic of the uncertain (or perhaps "embryonic") security architecture that currently prevails in the Gulf. The elements of mutual trust and multi-lateral, broad-spectrum security cooperation that sustained America's policy of extended deterrence during the Cold War are still vestigial there, and as a consequence even ostensibly straight-forward statements of strategic intent are liable to come in for unexpectedly close and potentially corrosive scrutiny.

### **Iran's Policy Options**

The ambivalence and mutual mistrust that have characterized the international response to Iran's nuclear program are basically derivative of the inherent uncertainty that surrounds it. Although the number of sensible observers who accept Iran's claim that it has no interest in nuclear weapons has now dwindled to a tiny few (if not to zero), the precise reach of its ambitions is in fact unknown, and is undoubtedly contested even within Iran itself. No one can say for sure whether Iran intends to create working nuclear weapons, or merely to place itself in a position to manufacture them on short notice should it wish to in the future, nor necessarily what difference this would make to the policy responses of others.

Nor does anyone know whether, having obtained nuclear weapons in some form, Iran might not foreswear the honor of proclaiming its success via a nuclear test, and adopt instead a policy of "nuclear opacity" modeled on that of Israel. Similar uncertainty has surrounded the intentions of all proliferator states as they have approached the nuclear threshold. If there is a distinctive element in the Iranian case, it is the element of panic with which all this natural uncertainty has been laced. A wide range of observers in the

US, Europe, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states, appear to believe that Iran is building its nuclear weapons in order to attack, or at least to expressly threaten, someone with them. These apprehensions are owed mainly to the hysterical posture that Iran's government has adopted toward international relations generally, that does not mean that such fears will not influence the conduct of the parties concerned, including Iran itself. States can become prisoners of their own rhetoric, after all, and ancient wisdom tells us that if you say the devil's name often enough, he really will appear.

I do not know whether these kinds of forebodings constitute the majority outlook among informed observers of Iran's nuclear program. Many reject them entirely, in favor of a more dispassionate assessment that Iran's objectives are broadly defensive: they are pursuing nuclear weapons to deter the United States and potentially powerful regional adversaries, and secondarily to benefit internally if not externally from the prestige that comes from owning them. Beyond these simple and familiar aspirations, it is argued, there is nothing but hot air.

There is much to be said for this view, which my political scientist colleagues characterize, somewhat optimistically, as "realism." Humanity's experience with nuclear weapons certainly weighs in its favor. We know a good deal about what it means to own nuclear weapons, after all, but virtually nothing about what it means to use them. It is not unreasonable to assume that this dearth of real knowledge about what happens when these things start to go off will weigh upon decision-makers in Teheran, the same as they have everywhere else. It is also true that, so far, nuclear proliferators have not paid any particularly price for their success: Israel, Pakistan, India, China, and North Korea have all managed to obtain nuclear weapons in defiance of strong American opposition, and afterwards the first four, at least, have enjoyed better relations with the Americans than they had in the past.

On balance I find this second sort of analysis more convincing than the first, if the aim is to understand what the Iranians are likely to achieve if they do succeed in obtaining nuclear weapons—which is to say, not all that much.<sup>1</sup> It is less clear that it affords an accurate view of what Iran's leadership hopes for, expects, and needs. On balance it seems safest to assume that, in pursuing nuclear weapons, Teheran is also seeking to create a "nuclear umbrella" of its own, one that is capable of sheltering and supporting a range of activities that its neighbors are likely to find threatening, but which it may believe can be pursued with greater safety in the shadow of a nuclear arsenal. The fact that Iran's leaders are liable to be disappointed in this does not mean the expectation is not important. It is possible that what lies behind Iran's blustering posture internationally is not hot air, but false hopes, which may do some damage even as they come crashing down.

In the Gulf Arab states one encounters widespread concern that the objective of Iran's nuclear policy is regional hegemony, which it will seek not by using the weapons, but by employing them as instruments of intimidation on the one hand, and as a source of prestige on the other. The point of the prestige would be to enhance Teheran's efforts to subvert the political legitimacy of its neighbors and mobilize Shi'a minorities in the

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<sup>1</sup> This is true unless you believe that the United States or some other powerful adversary really does intend to attack Iran. In that case the value of a nuclear deterrent might be judged very high.

region on behalf of the Islamic revolution. It is admittedly striking, however, that these fears exist side by side with a good deal of confidence that whatever social consequences might follow from military operations designed to cripple Iran's nuclear program could be managed well enough. This peculiar combination of anxiety and complacency suggests, if nothing else, that the social consequences of Iranian nuclear success have not been fully thought through—and perhaps cannot be with any confidence, even by those in the best position to judge.

In any case, Iran has good reason to believe that if it succeeds in obtaining nuclear weapons in the teeth of Western opposition, its public standing among those it already regards as its natural constituency in the region—the Arab “street” and its Shi'a members especially—will improve at the expense of neighboring regimes that will be portrayed, more vividly than ever, as cowering under the protection of the Americans and, indeed, the Israelis.

Iran's efforts to delegitimize regional rivals in this fashion must, however, be weighted against the costs it will have incurred in return for its nuclear success. Since the Revolution of 1979 Iran's economy has fallen irretrievably behind those of its Gulf Arab neighbors, a decline that is owed partly to the economically defective attitudes and practices that are characteristic of most post-revolutionary regimes, and partly to the international isolation that has been imposed upon it by the United States and others—a campaign that has recently escalated in response to the progress of Iran's nuclear program. Although it may go too far to view Iran as a failed state in the making, it is arguable that the stress its leaders have placed upon obtaining nuclear weapons has arisen in part from a need to find some form of success that can compensate for their increasingly conspicuous failure in the economic realm. This is a difficult combination of attitudes for outsiders to address in policy terms. One way or another, Iran is going to pay a high price for nuclear success. Its Arab neighbors believe it is absurd to suppose that they will not make every conceivable effort to redeem that sacrifice, one way or another.

A similar combination of anxieties afflicts the Israelis, who need not fear the withdrawal of the American nuclear umbrella, having long since prepared one of their own. They nevertheless fear that Iran may pose an “undeterrable” threat against which only preemptive action can prevail. This, at any rate, is the impression created by a very wide range of published accounts in recent months, whose appearance may be a form of public diplomacy in itself, intended either to dissuade the Iranians or to put pressure on the United States to behave more decisively than it has so far.

Less apocalyptically, the Israelis face two quasi-state adversaries, Hamas and Hezbollah, that are supported by Iran. Tel Aviv must consider that, even if the Iranians are not suicidally emboldened by nuclear success, their clients might be. That Israel possess the military means to master such threats goes without saying, a fact that will presumably not be lost on the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah either, however intoxicating Iran's nuclear success may prove. Yet the fact remains that Iran's opportunistic adoption of the Palestinian cause as if it were its own has linked the politics of the Gulf and the Levant more intimately (and perniciously) than in the past, and in ways that cannot be conducive to peace in the latter region. It is hard to believe that Iran's leadership does not see things this way, and difficult to make a prima facie case that they are wrong. That they may be

proven wrong by events is possible, perhaps likely; yet the destructive consequences of false hopes betrayed, in this realm as in others, cannot be discounted.

Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons may also be intended to bolster the internal stability of its present government, and provide it with a defense capability that is adequate to its security problems, as it sees them, and also one that is consistent with its ideological requirements. Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, as is well known, began under the Shah, and was directed primarily against Iraq. Its present program is not simply a revival of that earlier effort, but is best understood as a natural inference from its strategic experience since the 1979 revolution, in which implacable American hostility has been accompanied by strong evidence of impending military calamity. Iran's conventional military capabilities have never been more than barely adequate to its security needs—a statement that is true of every state in the region apart from Israel. The Islamic Republic's efforts to make up for this deficiency by recourse to "people's war" brought disaster in its conflict with Iraq, however, while the subsequent defeat of Iraq by the United States and its allies demonstrated the need to insure against technological surprise by a conventionally superior opponent.

Iran has surely concluded by now that the United Nations offers no protection against its potential enemies; and it is hard to believe that its leadership thinks it could survive in power in the wake of a war of national resistance conducted against a powerful invader like the United States. Like many other post-revolutionary regimes, Iran's autocratic leadership has concluded that it may not be able to trust the people after all, and it has come to rely, in military terms, on instruments that increasingly resemble the Waffen SS. The institutional interest of Iran's Revolutionary Guard in the success of the nuclear program can presumably be taken for granted; though its ability to exercise effective command and control over a nuclear arsenal cannot be. This almost incontestable fact aggravates all the other uncertainties that attach to the nuclear issue.

It seems certain that, at least in the short run, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons will reduce its susceptibility to conventional military pressure, and so weaken conventional deterrence in the region (which, as was suggested early, is a foundational element of successful extended deterrence in the nuclear sphere). The irony, of course, is that no one currently wants to go to war with Iran except, perhaps, to destroy its nuclear program. Even so, the commitment of Iran's present leadership to the pursuit of a working weapon, or (alternatively) of technical systems that place Iran one decision away from obtaining one, appears very firm. The political costs of climbing down from Teheran's nuclear commitments may well be too formidable to bear by the current leadership.

There is also little evidence that Iran's current leadership cares what the West thinks. So far, at least, it appears confident that it can withstand whatever political or economic pressure may be brought to bear against it. Irrespective of lingering confusion or ambivalence about its strategic purposes, whatever internal faction brings Iran across the nuclear threshold undoubtedly expects to be strengthened domestically. Given the risks they are running, both Khomeini and Ahmadinejad must surely see the nuclear program as a way to retain their hold on power. The objective of Western policy should accordingly be to highlight the costs of pursuing the nuclear option, and to insure that there are costs. The worst-case scenario, short of nuclear war, would be for Iran to succeed in its nuclear ambitions, and actually end up feeling safer and more secure as a consequence. At a

minimum, Iranian nuclear success will need to be matched by a much higher degree of defense cooperation between the Gulf States and its Western partners, including an increased forward deployment of Western forces in the region. The West's umbrella, in other words, must be bigger and more finely woven than Iran's, and visibly so both from Teheran and from other concerned capitals in the region and beyond it.

### **Gulf State Policy Options**

The essential question for the Gulf States is whether they can live indefinitely under a "defense umbrella" extended by others, or whether acceptance of such protection must be conceived as a step along the way toward an independent nuclear deterrent. The GCC would like to see the Iranian nuclear program halted somehow, and the fact that it has not been, despite the overwhelming power of the United States, has fed the belief that the US may prefer to live with a nuclear-armed Iran, rather than take the risks required to prevent that development. The assumption that the US might be acting more forcefully to dissuade the Iranians, and is not doing so, is widespread, and analogous to the belief that the US somehow holds the key to peace between Israel and the Palestinians, but for whatever reason is declining to use it.

The Gulf States are widely conceded to possess the financial and technical wherewithal to develop a nuclear capacity of their own; though questions of who would control such a deterrent (the GCC, the Arab League, or independent national governments) will inevitably prove contentious. Nor could such a program be completed in time to forestall the Iranians, while its inauguration would be seized upon by them as further vindication of their own nuclear project. It also seems safe to say that any effort by the Gulf states to pursue an independent nuclear capability would foreclose the option of seeking continued protection under extended deterrence provided by the United States. If the Gulf Arab states want the benefit of an American security guarantee, it is hard to imagine they will be able to pursue their own nuclear weapons program.

Given the critical nature of this choice, it is essential that the Gulf Arabs make their requirements clear in their dealings with the US. In particular, it must be mutually recognized that, if Iran is allowed to obtain nuclear weapons, security guarantees extended to the region must be nuclear in nature. These are not issues that can wait until the day after the first successful Iranian nuclear test, but should be thoroughly explored in advance.

### **US Policy Options**

There is no doubt about the overwhelming nature of American capabilities compared to those of Iran. Yet there are concerns about the United States' long term commitment to defend the region, and also over its general stance toward the range of threats posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. The concept of a "defense umbrella," reflective of American experience as senior partner of the Western alliance during the Cold War, will not necessarily prevent a surprise attack with nuclear weapons, a remote possibility from the vantage of Europe or the United States perhaps, but must less so from the perspective of the Arab Gulf states or Israel. Nor is it likely to ameliorate subversion and terrorism in the region. In this regard our "umbrella" is as irrelevant as Teheran's. The concept of "deterrence by punishment" that prevailed during the Cold War cannot be picked up and applied successfully in an environment in which the first blow, if it succeeds, will be

politically decisive; nor one in which blows may be so incremental and obscure that they cannot be detected in a way that allows for retribution.

America's declaratory policy of opposing an Iranian nuclear weapons program is undermined by other feature of its policy, including its prior willingness to tolerate successful proliferation by Israel and Pakistan. It is not only the weapons of those states that cast a shadow over the region, but the fact that they paid no substantial political price for having obtained them, a fact of which the Iranians and everyone else is well aware. America's overall strategic posture since the collapse of the Soviet Union has also increasingly deemphasized nuclear weapons. It is widely assumed that the Obama administration seeks to abolish nuclear weapons, and failing that to reduce their general significance by sharply reducing the total number held by the United States and the Russia. Given these general atmospherics, talk of extending a "defense umbrella" does not carry the conviction that American leadership may intend that it should. It is also apparent that, if a policy of nuclear arms reduction trending toward abolition or "minimal" deterrence is ever successfully pursued, the entire concept of "extended" deterrence must at some point be cast aside.

It is also worth keeping in mind that, while the United States is merely first among equals among nuclear weapon states, its conventional capabilities are unparalleled, and arguably more important in restraining Iran from the kind of behavior that might threaten the stability of the Gulf. Unless one assumes that Iran's objective is in fact to launch a nuclear attack against one of its neighbors, then the maintenance of effective conventional deterrence will remain central to regional stability—just as the erosion of conventional deterrence may be the principal risk associated with Iran's nuclear program.

The central challenge of American policy must accordingly be to retain and strengthen the trust of its allies. For this purpose a number of mechanisms suggest themselves, including improved and strengthened defense cooperation across the board, and a continued, sustained American military presence. As in Cold War Europe, such forces are the ultimate guarantee that American interests will be at stake in any major conflict in the region. The chief advantage that the United States offers as a security guarantor is not that it possesses nuclear weapons, but that it is capable of sustaining full-spectrum engagement in a way that supports conventional deterrence as well. Nuclear weapons are the answer to a relatively narrow range of regional questions, and answering those questions while neglecting others may prove destabilizing in itself.