

**EXTENDED DETERRENCE, SECURITY GUARANTEES, AND NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION:  
STRATEGIC STABILITY IN THE GULF REGION**

Project organized by the Center for Contemporary Conflict, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School  
in conjunction with the Gulf Research Center

with support from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency's  
Advanced Systems and Concepts Office

*Conference held at the Gulf Research Center  
Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE)  
October 4-5, 2009*

By James Russell and Daniel Moran<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

On October 4-5, 2009, the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC), in conjunction with the Gulf Research Center (GRC), convened in Dubai, UAE, to discuss the role of extended deterrence and security assurances in the regional security environment. The Gulf States, like others in the Middle East and beyond, have growing concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional objectives, as well the West's commitment to providing security assurances against Iranian aggression. The conversation touched on the history and application of extended deterrence and security guarantees in the region, and elaborated on the perceptions among Gulf nations of their current security environment. The event included representatives from the Naval Postgraduate School, Gulf Research Center, King's College, the Foundation pour la Recherche Stratégique, the University of Salzburg, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and senior representatives from the armed forces of Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman.

The conference was conducted on the basis of non-attribution. Those present participated with the expectation that they would be free to make use of the information presented as they like, provided that nothing said would be attributed to any person. The summary that follows adheres to this principle. Anyone wishing to obtain copies of the presentations of individual participants should contact them directly.

It must be emphasized that the summary below reflects the major topics discussed at the conference, but should not be interpreted as reflecting any consensus with respect to conclusions. Conference participants were not asked to reach any collective conclusions, and did not do so. Nor was any attempt made to reconcile all the diverging views that emerged in the discussion, and which are reflected in the account that follows.

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<sup>1</sup> The conference organizers wish to thank Nick Masellis and Lewis Dunn for compiling the original notes on which this summary of the conference proceedings is based.

# Report Documentation Page

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## Extended Deterrence as a Concept

The concept paper that provided the starting point for the conference discussed the emergence of extended deterrence as a key strategic concept during the Cold War, its contribution to the stability of deterrence overall, and its role in restraining nuclear proliferation among the allies and client states of the major nuclear powers. Discussion at the conference focused on how far the practices and inferences of extended nuclear deterrence during the Cold War could be extended to the Middle East, where regional politics are markedly different from those of Cold War Europe, and to an environment in which conventional deterrence is also important and not entirely subsumed within a framework of nuclear confrontation.

One contributor proposed that successful extended deterrence required at least three components: adequate military capability, resolve to act in specified circumstances, and communication of that resolve to allies and potential adversaries. Others noted that the history of extended deterrence in practice revealed the importance of

- Continuous, active engagement among security partners, including effective consultative mechanisms;
- Persistent military contact, cooperative planning, and engagement;
- A sustained U.S. military presence, which, as several participants noted, has been declining in recent years outside of Iraq; and
- Diverse political, cultural, and economic linkages that have characterized the Atlantic alliance since the 1950s.

Although effective extended deterrence must rest upon firm declaratory policies, the truly credible signaling of its reality could only be accomplished by these kind of continuous and diverse interactions.

The point was strengthened by the observation that deterrence per se is generally relatively easy to achieved but that convincing junior partners that it has been achieved can be surprisingly difficult. Extended deterrence does not require formal alliances, but it does depend on visibly effective defense cooperation across the board. The building of mutual trust, it was proposed, is a “hands-on” process. Several participants argued that one step toward building trust would be the adherence of all states in the region to the IAEA’s Additional Protocol, though it was noted that, so long as Iran was not Party to the Protocol, there was little incentive or likelihood that Arab states would adhere to it. Nor is Israel a Party, a fact that limits the United States’ capacity and will to exert pressure on this issue by virtue of its unstinting support for Tel Aviv.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s recent comment that, in the event that Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapon, the U.S. “defense umbrella” would be extended to any state it might attack, was mentioned repeatedly over the two days of meetings. Although the constructive intention of the remark was generally accepted, many participants feared that it would be interpreted, and may even have been intended, as a step toward U.S. acceptance of a nuclear-armed Iran, a prospect viewed with great alarm throughout the region. One contributor argued that it was a mistake to discuss a security commitment explicitly prior to Iran actually

obtaining a weapon, since such a discussion itself might serve to legitimize the Iranian nuclear program in the eyes of some observers. Many participants felt that any hint that Iran might be allowed to successfully cross the nuclear threshold was a mistake on its face and weakened the mutual trust on which effective extended deterrence depended. Others argued that the American defense umbrella had in fact been extended to the region long since, and that the secretary's comment had inadvertently raised questions where none need have been asked. The degree to which the extension of a "defense umbrella" involved an explicitly nuclear guarantee – that is, a guarantee that a nuclear attack by Iran would be met with a nuclear response by the United States – was uncertain. Some participants believed that such a statement from a state with nuclear weapons would always be understood to incorporate the nuclear option. Others noted the centrality of conventional deterrence to regional stability, and argued that the most likely and appropriate response to most forms of aggression by Iran would be conventional in nature.

### **Iran's Nuclear Ambitions and Policy Options**

The nature of Iran's nuclear ambitions and the possible policy options that it wishes to support by virtue of its pursuit of nuclear weapons were recurring themes of the conference. Not everyone was persuaded that Iran desired, or needed to acquire, working nuclear weapons in order to accomplish its policy goals. Others argued that Iran's aim was to seek hegemony across the region, and that it regarded the possession of nuclear weapons as essential to doing so. Most participants accepted that, in general, states seek nuclear weapons because history has shown that, one way or another, doing so improves their position internationally. Yet it was recognized that it may be a mistake to assume that the Iranians have a clear and consistent idea of what they are trying to achieve. Their weapons program remains contested within the country, even if the pursuit of nuclear energy, for the material benefits that it would offer and as a symbol of national sophistication and modernity, did not.

Some of those present believed that the object of Iran's program was to obtain the means to wage nuclear war, and that once it had nuclear weapons in hand it would threaten to do so as a means of imposing its will upon its neighbors. The long-run goal of such conduct would be to drive the U.S. out of the region and replace the current order with one based upon its own hegemony. Others consider such overt nuclear warmongering unlikely and argued that the purpose of nuclear weapons for Iran was to provide a deterrent shield behind which it could carry out its current policies of coercion and subversion by means of client organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah. Within the Gulf region, an Iranian nuclear capability would provide the cover necessary for it to continue its policy of subverting and delegitimizing the present governments there and perhaps allow it to intervene more vigorously and openly in their domestic affairs.

Although Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons began under the Shah, its present program is best understood as a natural inference from its strategic experiences since the 1979 revolution. The Islamic Republic's commitment to "people's war" brought disaster in its war with Iraq in the 1980s, 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 concluded that the United Nations offers it virtually no protection against its potential enemies and that irregular or "asymmetrical" warfare is its best option outside the nuclear arena.

In some respects Iran has become captive of its own rhetoric. Much of its behavior is driven by its history of defying great power influence. The ability of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps to control a nuclear force, if it came to that, is a source of great uncertainty, particularly given the region's general lack of political transparency and strategic dialogue.

Most participants accepted that, one way or another, the possession of nuclear weapons would reduce Iran's susceptibility to conventional military pressure, and so weaken conventional deterrence in the region. Others were not so sure, arguing that no one currently wished to go to war with Iran except, ironically, to destroy its nuclear program. There was a general consensus, however, that the commitment of Iran's present leadership to the pursuit of a working weapon, or (alternatively) of technical systems that placed the state one decision away from obtaining one, was very firm, and that the political costs of climbing down from Tehran's nuclear commitments would probably be judged too formidable to bear by the current leadership.

There is, in any event, little evidence that Iran's leadership cares what the West thinks. It appears confident that it can withstand whatever political or economic pressure might be brought to bear against it. Several participants argued that, irrespective of lingering confusion or ambivalence about its strategic purposes, whatever internal faction brings Iran across the nuclear threshold will be strengthened domestically: both Khomeini and Ahmadinejad, it was argued, see the nuclear program as a way to retain their hold on power. They are no longer interested in a deal. The objective of Western policy should accordingly be to highlight the costs of pursuing the nuclear option and indeed to insure that there are costs. The worst-case scenario, short of actual 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, nuclear success by Iran would 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.

It was recognized that the exact technical state of Iran's nuclear program is unknown and might easily be overestimated. It was noted, however, that history showed that it was a mistake to assume that states with apparently marginal technical competence could not obtain nuclear weapons (Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea were noted as examples). Iran's nuclear program is certainly the most advanced, apart from Israel's, in the Middle East. Algeria, Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia have all taken modest steps to investigate the feasibility of nuclear weapons. However, none appears to have traveled very far down that path because of deficiencies in natural resources or technological wherewithal or because of pressure from their major international partners. Nevertheless, the likelihood that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would cause these and other states to revisit the issue is apparent and must be considered one of the most serious and potentially unmanageable risks in the entire situation. If Iran were to employ its nuclear weapons as the foundation for a more actively interventionist policy in the region, that would merely exacerbate an already serious problem.

## **U.S. Policy Options**

There is no doubt about the overwhelming nature of U.S. capabilities compared to those of Iran. Yet there are concerns about the United States' long-term commitment to defending the Gulf 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 U.S. experience as the senior partner of the

Western alliance during the Cold War, will not necessarily prevent a surprise attack with nuclear weapons; nor will the persistence and intensification of subversion and terrorism in the region. A single surprise nuclear attack would decimate a country the size of the UAE. It would be irreversibly devastating to the point that any subsequent punishment inflicted upon Iran would scarcely matter to the initial victims. 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 succeeded, will be politically decisive; nor can it be applied to a context in which “blows” may be so incremental and obscure that they cannot be detected in a way that allows for retribution.

The United States’ declaratory policy of opposing Iran’s nuclear weapons program is undermined by other policies, including its prior willingness to tolerate successful proliferation by Israel, Pakistan, and India. It is not only the weapons of those states that cast a shadow over the region, but the reality that they paid no substantial political price for having obtained them, a situation Iran and much of the rest of the world are well aware of. America’s overall strategic posture since the collapse of the Soviet Union has also increasingly deemphasized nuclear weapons. Some of its nuclear weapons systems are in terminal decline with no replacement systems in sight. It is widely assumed that the Obama administration seeks to abolish nuclear weapons and, failing that, to reduce their general significance within the international arena by sharply reducing the total number held by the United States and Russia. Given this general climate, talk of extending an (implicitly nuclear) defense umbrella does not carry the conviction that U.S. leadership may genuinely have intended it to. 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.

One participant proposed that the United States might perceive a strategic benefit from Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon, a development that would drive the Arab world further under U.S. protection and that of Israel. Although this suggestion did not command general assent, many participants shared the view that, from the point of view of the Gulf States, the world has become less “unipolar” than “non-polar,” and that the American commitment to extended deterrence has become more complicated and contingent, hence less robust, than it had been during the Cold War. At a minimum, the United States must somehow insure that Iran adheres to its obligations under the nonproliferation treaty, though the exact means by which it might do so were admittedly unclear.

At the same time, it was recognized 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 to launch a nuclear attack against one of its neighbors, then the maintenance of effective conventional deterrence will remain central to regional stability and should also remain the long-term focus of U.S. policy. In the final analysis, U.S. engagement in the region will certainly bring with it the possibility that such involvement would include nuclear weapons, at least under some circumstances. In any event, Iran’s nuclear program can be destroyed or crippled by conventional military means. This will remain true even if Iran manages to produce a workable weapon. Conventional deterrence does not depend upon the threat of punishment but on the presence of an effective defense, which may well be possible given the small and vulnerable nature of Iran’s nuclear program.

Some participants expressed the belief that the only acceptable goal for U.S. policy must be to prevent Iran's nuclear program from succeeding, if necessary by means of direct military attack, the consequences of which for the political stability of the rest of the region they regarded as manageable. It was argued that firmer declaratory policies, including, for instance, a categorical guarantee that the Strait of Hormuz would remain open under all circumstances, are necessary to sustain the credibility of the strategic partnership between the United States and the Gulf states and, absent such an unambiguous stance by the U.S., the natural course for the Arab world would ultimately be to obtain its own nuclear capability. It can also be taken for granted that, to the extent that the American public comes to believe that America's strategic commitment in the Gulf will expose the United States to nuclear attack, the credibility of America's extended deterrence will be undermined.

The central challenge for U.S. foreign policy is to retain and strengthen the trust of its allies. For this purpose, a number of mechanisms were suggested, 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 U.S. interests would be at stake in any major conflict in the region. Some participants felt that a clearer declaratory policy, including defining specific actions that would trigger explicit responses, would strengthen American credibility. At present, U.S. allies in the Gulf have been left to infer the extent of American resolve from the scale of its capabilities, an imperfect process, at best, and an insufficient basis for such a critical strategic relationship.

### **Policy Options for Europe, Russia, China, and Israel**

Although the United States is the main external security provider in the Gulf region, other outsiders, including the European Union (EU) and some of its major members, along with Russia, China, and Israel, have important security commitments or security-related interests there. The French have made a country-specific security guarantee to the UAE under which both countries have agreed on a tailored response to security threats. In France's strategy, the role of nuclear weapons in the region is unspecified, and it would be wrong to assume in this or other cases that the security commitments of a nuclear power are necessarily nuclear commitments. Yet, it would also be hazardous for Iran to assume that the nuclear option is excluded.

France has security agreements with other Gulf-region states as well; these have not been made public. The UK also has strong relations with the Emirates. Israel has consulted China directly about the acceptability of the Iranian nuclear weapons program and has been told that it is not considered acceptable. Russia has long competed with the United States and the West in extending its protection and influence in the Gulf and is currently Iran's most sympathetic ally among major powers. As one participant noted, since the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990, there has been a general presumption that a serious threat to the security of the Gulf would inspire far-reaching and decisive international reactions. It is considered exceptionally reckless for anyone to act in defiance of this presumption.

If the principle object of extended deterrence is to prevent Gulf states from pursuing the path of nuclear weapons, a secondary objective, from the point of view of these outside states, may be the pursuit of competitive advantages in energy markets, which may come from being the state

that most successfully provides protection. The provision of security in the Gulf could become competitive in itself and hence potentially destabilizing. The most dangerous rivalry would involve competitive efforts to extend “nuclear umbrellas.” Although the one afforded by the United States is potentially the most formidable, there is concern that it may not prove the most credible in the end, opening a gap that might be filled by other nuclear-weapons states, including the UK, France, and even Pakistan.

The chief advantage that the United States offers as a security guarantor in the region 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 security concerns, and answering those questions at the neglect of others could prove destabilizing by itself. Conversely, both Russia and China, having hedged their bets in the region by maintaining relatively cordial relations with Iran, would be required if not to renounce, then at least to moderate, those relations. Ideally, the P-5 would provide the driving force behind multilateral security cooperation in the region. Up to now, however, other elements of their mutual relations, including intense competition for arms sales, have stood in the way.

Israel’s place in the regional security picture is especially ambiguous. It is capable of striking directly against Iranian nuclear facilities, an action that the Gulf states deprecate publically, but which a number of participants declared would be tolerated as preferable to Iranian success. Some argued, to the contrary, that Israel, like the United States, might prefer to see the Iranians succeed, because doing so could drive Arab states further under their protection as the region’s only other nuclear-armed states. Israel is the only state in the region to possess an effect deterrent against Iran. Although Iranian nuclear success would deprive Israel of its regional nuclear monopoly, it would not necessarily pose a critical threat to its security, unless one supposes that Iran cannot be deterred.

There is no question that the Israeli nuclear program is widely resented in the region and that its partial success has contributed to legitimizing Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons in the eyes of the public. Yet, it is also clear that the Arab world does not fear a nuclear attack by Israel. The larger question is how Israel’s program and its official stance of nuclear “opacity” might figure in some kind of grand bargain to stabilize the region, a bargain whose provisions would have to include Palestine as well as the Gulf. While it is hard to imagine that Israel could be persuaded to abandon its nuclear weapons, it might be persuaded to assume the responsibilities of a nuclear weapons state under the NPT in exchange for meaningful improvements in its own security.

### **Gulf-state Policy Options**

The essential question for the Gulf states is whether they can live indefinitely under a “security umbrella” extended by others, or whether their pursuit of such protection must be conceived as a step toward an independent nuclear deterrent. The Gulf Cooperation Council (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 U.S. may prefer to live with a nuclear-armed Iran rather than take the risks required to prevent that development. The assumption that the U.S. could be acting more forcefully to dissuade or persuade Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions, yet is not doing so, is widespread and analogous to the belief that the U.S.

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 capacity to develop a nuclear capacity of their own, though the question of who would control such a deterrent (the GCC, the Arab League, or independent national governments) would prove contentious. Such programs could not be completed in time to forestall Iran, however, and would likely be seized upon by Tehran as further vindication of its own, currently unacknowledged ambition to become a nuclear-weapons state. History suggests that any effort by the Gulf states to pursue an independent nuclear capability would foreclose the option of seeking protection under extended deterrence. If the GCC wants the benefit of an American security guarantee, it will not be able to pursue its own nuclear weapons program.

Given the critical nature of this choice, it is essential that the GCC make its requirements clear in its dealings with the U.S. 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 and settled upon in advance.

Iran's right to pursue nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is widely conceded within the region. Any policy adopted by the GCC to interfere with Iran's nuclear program will have to contend with this public and official perception. One option is to employ the ability of the Gulf states to drive down oil prices to levels below that which are required to support Iran's nuclear program and, more generally, the efforts of Tehran to co-opt public opposition through the provision of government subsidies and handouts. The Gulf can live with lower oil prices than Iran can tolerate, but in so doing it would nevertheless be making a sacrifice required because of what some participants regarded as the weakness of America's stance in the region. If the U.S. is "in charge of" security in the Gulf, then it is believed the primary responsibility for coping with Iran's nuclear program lies in Washington.

A number of participants claimed that the GCC is prepared to live with the consequences of carefully tailored military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, whether carried out by the U.S. or Israel. It was also widely noted, however, that public support for the U.S. throughout the region has declined. The impact of military action on social stability in the region is difficult to gauge. So, too, is the impact of sharply lower oil prices. Neither issue was discussed in detail, but both scenarios will need attention in the near future. It was assumed that the objective of military action against Iran, or of coercive economic sanctions and manipulation of oil prices, must ultimately be to overthrow Iran's Islamic Republic and replace it with a regime more conducive to regional stability. Any strategy aiming at "regime change" in Iran would require careful and detailed prior consultation throughout the region and could not be successfully attempted as a unilateral action, regardless of superior U.S. military capabilities.

## Appendix I: List of Participants

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James Acton, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Staff Brigadier General Aqab Shaheen Aqab Al-Ali, UAE Chief of the Staff Office

Staff Lieutenant Colonel Hamad bin Suleiman bin Hamed Al-Burtomany, HQ Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces

Staff Brigadier General Khalid Ibrahim Al-Fadhala, HQ Bahrain Defense Forces

Staff Colonel Mohammad bin Salman Al-Khalifa, HQ Bahrain Defense Forces

Brigadier General Abdulaziz Abdullah Al-Mahmoud, Director, Strategic Studies Center, Qatar Armed Forces

Staff Lieutenant Colonel Rasheed bin Saeed bin Ahmed Al-Maskery, HQ Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces

Mustafa Alani, Gulf Research Center, UAE

CDR. Christopher Bidwell, DTRA/ASCO

Wyn Bowen, War Studies Department, King's College, London

Staff Colonel Yahya Yahya Khadem Ali Buamim, UAE Chief of Staff Office

Shahram Chubin, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Lewis Dunn, Science Applications International Cooperation (SAIC)

Hassan El-Bahtimy, War Studies Department, King's College

Camille Grande, Fondation pour la Recherche Strategique

David Hamon, DTRA/ASCO

Brigadier General (ret.) Feroz Khan, Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School

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Nick N. Masellis, Center for Contemporary Conflict, Naval Postgraduate School

Daniel Moran, Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School

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Fritz Stienhausler, University of Salzburg, Austria

Nicole Stracke, Gulf Research Center, UAE

Bruno Tertrais, Fondation pour la Recherche Strategique

James Wirtz, School of International Graduate Studies, Naval Postgraduate School

## Appendix II: Meeting Agenda

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### 4 October 2009

0930 *Introduction and Welcoming Remarks*

- Abdulaziz Sager, Gulf Research Center
- James Russell, Naval Postgraduate School
- David Hamon, DTRA-ASCO

1000 *Roundtable 1: Extended Deterrence and Security Guarantees Applied in the Gulf: Historical and Conceptual Background*

- Mustafa Alani, GRC
- James Russell and Daniel Moran, NPS, “Historical Background and Perspectives”
- Wyn Bowen, King’s College, “Competitive Security Guarantees and Extended Deterrence in the Gulf”

1130 Coffee Break

1200 *Roundtable 2: Current Perceptions of Extended Deterrence*

- Bruno Tertrais, FRS, “A European View of Security Guarantees and Extended Deterrence in the Gulf”
- Hassan El-Bahtimy, King’s College, “Communicating Extended Deterrence: Nuclear Signaling in the Gulf”

1330 Lunch

1430 *Roundtable 3: Current Perceptions of Security Guarantees*

- Daniel Moran, NPS, “Israel’s Nuclear Program and the Logic of Proliferation”
- Shahram Chubin, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Iranian Perspectives on Deterrence and Security Guarantees”

1630 Day’s Conclusion

### 5 October 2009

0930 *Roundtable 4: Impact on the Regional Security Environment*

- James Russell, Naval Postgraduate School, “Extended Deterrence, Security Guarantees, and Interstate Bargaining”
- Fritz Steinhausler, University of Salzburg, “Nuclear Power and Infrastructure Security”

1100 Coffee Break

1115 *Roundtable 5: Global and Regional Implications*

- James Acton, Carnegie Endowment, “Deterrence and Disarmament”
- James Wirtz, NPS, “Extended Deterrence and Security Strategy”
- Lewis Dunn, SAIC Corporation, “Extending Reassurance, Projecting Deterrence: Issues, Options, and Choices”

1300 Lunch

1400 Conference Conclusion

### Appendix III: Initial Concept Paper

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This conference will consider the role of nuclear weapons in sustaining or undermining the security of the Persian Gulf Region. Its focus is on three linked concepts: extended deterrence, security guarantees, and nuclear proliferation. Its aim is to consider what kinds of conditions will be required to insure that extended deterrence and security guarantees continue to promote regional stability in and around the Gulf, as they have, for the most part, in the past; and, conversely, what can be done to avert nuclear proliferation among the Gulf states and their immediate neighbors, as well as among extremist groups that seek to operate there.

The idea of extended deterrence is a product of the early Cold War. It reflected the shared concern of the nuclear superpowers, the United States of America (U.S.) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), that the spread of nuclear weapons would complicate their relationship 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 U.S. nor the USSR could tolerate the loss of prestige, credibility, and power that would follow an unavenged nuclear attack on one of its partners. As a consequence, the concept of extended deterrence proved robust in practice. Even states for which nuclear weapons were within technological reach generally judged that the risk of owning them was greater than that of trusting the protection afforded by one of two established nuclear superpowers.

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 prescribed 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. The handful of states known to possess nuclear weapons promised not to employ them against any country 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 nonproliferation regime established in 1968.

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 that associated the possession of nuclear weapons with prestige and influence, a perception that was reinforced by the general reluctance of states with nuclear weapons to give them up. The disappearance of the USSR in the early 1990s, perhaps paradoxically, called into question the continued credibility of the extended deterrence offered by the United States. When there were two dominant "nuclear umbrellas," it was readily assumed, despite the nonaligned movement, that each covered whatever states and territories the other did not. Now that the United States is the sole remaining superpower, the extent of America's nuclear umbrella has become uncertain, as have the conditions under which its protection might be withdrawn.

Nuclear proliferation is today a major threat to stability in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. This conference seeks to explore the logic and functioning of extended nuclear deterrence and associated security guarantees in the Persian Gulf, a region that is currently free of nuclear weapons, but may not be for much longer. One state in the region, Iran, is widely believed to be in active pursuit of a nuclear arsenal, a prospect that has been declared unacceptable by many outside powers, ranging from the European Union to China. Two of them—Israel and the United States—are thought to have developed plans for direct military intervention against Iran’s nuclear facilities in the event that diplomacy fails to halt Tehran’s nuclear-weapons program, the existence of which Teheran denies.

Such intervention, needless to say, would be profoundly destabilizing for the rest of the Gulf states. So, too, would Teheran’s success in developing a nuclear weapon. Saudi Arabia, in particular, is thought likely to seek its own independent nuclear deterrent to counter an Iranian nuclear arsenal, as might Egypt. While other Gulf states may not view Iran’s program with the same degree of alarm as Riyadh, their equanimity becomes markedly reduced when considering the possibility of a Saudi-Iranian nuclear standoff.

The politics of nuclear weapons are also influenced by the politics of nuclear energy. Its attraction to states in the Gulf is a source of suspicion for some observers, who fear that such projects, particularly when conducted by states floating on an ocean of oil, can only be a mask for weapons development. Historically, the connection between nuclear energy and weapons proliferation has not been strong, though Iran’s proffered explanation of its own interest in nuclear technology in terms of a desire for nuclear energy has muddied the waters in this regard. A number of Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain have declared that their programs would not include an indigenous uranium-enrichment capability, the critical building block for a weapons program that Teheran has so far refused to relinquish. At a minimum, the accelerating interest in nuclear power among Gulf states will complicate the task of detecting weapons proliferation, as well as restraining the spread of nuclear technology and materials beyond the control of regional governments.

Attitudes toward nuclear weapons among Gulf states are also shaped by the continued existence of Israel’s nuclear arsenal. Israel has been a nuclear power since the late 1960s. Its successful emergence as an “undeclared” nuclear-weapons state, despite the expressed opposition of the U.S. and other major powers, is regarded as an affront by other governments in the region, and also perhaps as a model for emulation. Israel, for its part, has a proven track record of military action to forestall the development of nuclear weapons by its neighbors, having demolished nascent nuclear programs in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007) without apparent negative consequence to itself. Few doubt Israel’s capacity and will to take similar action in the future.

Israel is, in any case, but one of three nuclear-armed states—along with India and Pakistan—that have slipped the leash of the Cold War nonproliferation regime, and whose proximity to the Gulf necessarily influences attitudes toward nuclear weapons there. The picture is further complicated by the fact that all three of these states now enjoy warm relations with the United States—a source of reassurance, perhaps, but one that also casts doubt on America’s ability to extend the deterrent effect of its own nuclear arsenal elsewhere in the region should that become necessary. It also suggests, somewhat ironically, that successful proliferators may have less to fear from the United States than might be expected, given the adamancy of its professed opposition to the spread of nuclear arms, yet its inability to curtail even friendly governments.

Since the end of the Second World War the security of the Persian Gulf has, for practical purposes, been in the hands of the major oil-consuming states in the West. Their willingness to extend their 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 incentive, in any event, is strong than ever; yet, it is unclear, absent the overarching external threat posed by the USSR, what types of policies it can support on its own.

The aim of this conference is to consider how, and how far, the logic and practice of extended nuclear deterrence and multilateral and bilateral security guarantees can be adapted to address current and future threats to stability in the Persian Gulf region. Military strategies calculated to ward off outsiders may not be readily applicable to the maintenance of regional stability, nor to containing rising regional powers like Iran. Conversely, the range of choices available to Gulf states, both in the marketplace and in terms of strategic partnerships, is far wider than it used to be. So, too, is the range of threats against which deterrence must be extended, including not just the emergence of regional nuclear powers, but possibly the suppression of conventional conflict, terrorism, subversion, and internal unrest as well. Certainly whatever strategies are adopted in the nuclear arena must be compatible with the requirements of these other challenges, where the threats, while less calamitous, are also more immediate.