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A Tipping Point Realized? Nuclear Proliferation in the Persian Gulf and Middle East

JAMES A. RUSSELL

After preoccupying debates over security in the Middle East, for the European Union and the United States since 2003, Iranian nuclearization is certain to remain at the top of the international security agenda for years to come. Libya may have been solved and North Korea ameliorated, but solution of the Iranian riddle remains distant. Unless there is an unexpected breakthrough leading to Iranian repudiation of its nuclear options, the incoming presidential administration in Washington will confront this long-standing issue when it takes power in January 2009. Just as serious as the problems posed by Iran itself are the potential ripple effects throughout the Middle East and Persian Gulf if Iran's program is not significantly slowed or stopped.

There are many dangerous outcomes to the situation, including the prospect of an Israeli or American military strike on Iran's nuclear sites and event that could trigger to a wider regional war. Also near the top of any alarming outcomes list is the possibility that Saudi Arabia will feel compelled to take corresponding steps to ensure its deterrent capacity – just as it did in during the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War when it acquired CSS-2 missiles from China. In conversations with American diplomats in Riyadh in early 2008, US Senate researchers found that: 'These diplomats repeatedly emphasized that an Iranian nuclear weapon frightens the Saudis "to their core" and would compel the Saudis to seek nuclear weapons.'¹ Their conclusions reinforce the findings of other studies suggesting that while other Gulf states take a somewhat less alarmist view about the prospects of an Iranian bomb, their equanimity becomes markedly less so in the event of corresponding Saudi action in response to Iran.²

The Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East today sit precariously on an uncertain nuclear threshold that may cause a variety of regional states to reconsider their nuclear status. A variety of issues frame the nuclear decision-making calculus for the region's governing elites. Iran's continued standoff with the international community over its refusal to honour its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) forms an overriding component of the strategic framework through which states are viewing the security environment. Another element is Israel's nuclear program and its policy of preventing any regional state from threatening the Jewish state with nuclear weapons. Israel's October 2007 strike against an alleged Syrian nuclear reactor provided only the latest reminder of Israel's commitment to maintain its regional nuclear monopoly. Another complicating element in the strategic framework is a resurgent interest in nuclear energy. During 2006 and 2007, 13 states in the Middle East North Africa region unexpectedly announced plans to

pursue nuclear energy.³ Some of these plans admittedly represent a minimal proliferation threat. Various regional states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain have all indicated that their programs would not include an indigenous uranium enrichment capability – a critical building block for a weapons program. Despite assurances by Middle Eastern regional leaders that their programs will represent ‘models’ for other states seeking peaceful nuclear programs,⁴ however, many fear that these programs create opportunities for clandestine nuclear programs and a new and destabilizing nuclear arms race.⁵ Last is the uncertain status of the security guarantees associated with United States’ strategic nuclear umbrella, which, while clearly extended to Israel, are on more uncertain footing relative to America’s Gulf and Middle Eastern partners.

What is the security policy community to make of these dynamics in which proliferation, deterrence, extended deterrence, and conflict escalation are all interacting in a complex interstate bargaining framework? When the region’s resurgent interest in nuclear power comes amidst an unstable strategic environment, policy-makers should be justifiably concerned. When Iranian, American, and Israeli nuclear sabre-rattling is combined with the potential for a series of new regional nuclear programs, it is not so difficult for policy-makers to imagine conditions leading to a cascading series of destabilizing steps as the region slips into an uncertain nuclear future.⁶ It should be emphasized that developments in the region come amidst broader concerns that global efforts to control the spread of nuclear weapons have failed and that the international regime to control the spread of the nuclear weapons – the NPT – is in danger of becoming irrelevant. Reflecting this fear, some believe that the international system today sits precariously perched at a nuclear tipping point where states will abandon normative restraints against developing nuclear weapons, resulting in a proliferation epidemic and a world of many nuclear powers.⁷ The Middle East could today be at that tipping point.

This article focuses specifically on the potential that the regime’s governing elites will seek to acquire their own nuclear deterrent in the event that Iran’s nuclear ambitions are not successfully forestalled. Policy-makers and security studies scholars must deconstruct the dynamics of the unfolding situation as a first step in building policies to prevent the region from careening into an alternative future that features a dramatically altered and more dangerous nuclear posture. How are they to accomplish this? This article answers the question by applying a series of competing theoretical explanations for nuclear proliferation and assesses the implications they offer for policy prescriptions. It concludes that neo-realist assumptions correspond with revealing precision to observed trends in the Arab Middle East, especially when alloyed with constructivist insights into domestic imperatives. While identity-based approaches highlight important variables, they are not essential to explaining the trends examined here.

The article shows that any successful approach to controlling proliferation and preventing a new nuclear arms race must deal with the security dilemma of Middle Eastern states that has been altered – perhaps permanently – by the American invasion of Iraq, the increased political influence of Iran, and the continued violent spiral in the Arab–Israeli dispute. These three factors have combined to create new internal

political pressures on regional regimes while at the same time creating a new and disturbing regional distribution of power that is shaping the region's approach to nuclear issues.⁸ Hence, this article concludes that the regional approach to proliferation is being shaped simultaneously by two complementary forces: 1) changing internal political dynamics, and 2) perceptions of a changed regional distribution of political and military power. Recognizing these forces is the crucial first step in developing policies that can mitigate the prospect of the further spread of nuclear weapons in the region.

Explanatory Frameworks

Proliferation studies have themselves proliferated into a wide spectrum of approaches, differing both in assumptions about why countries pursue nuclear weapons, when it is most dangerous, and what can be done about it.⁹ Despite the important contributions of alternative approaches, in the Middle East it is realist and especially neo-realist postulates that are most compelling and widely accepted. Neo-realists maintain that security dilemmas and the relative distribution of power in the international system is the driving structural dynamic governing the interactions of states.¹⁰ States pursue security through a combination of arms buildups and political-military relationships with other strong states in alliances. Pursuit of nuclear weapons – the ultimate guarantor of state security – and/or nuclear partners is explained under realist theory as a logical result of states' quest for security. That quest for security is operationalized by states' political leadership using a rational decision-making process that apportioning available resources to mitigate threats to the state.

Kenneth N. Waltz argued in 1981 that the underlying dynamics of the international system would inevitably result in a world of many nuclear states. He controversially suggested nuclear proliferation would not necessarily lead to a more unstable international environment, since possession of nuclear weapons would make the costs of war unnecessarily high for states and would thus naturally weight the decision-making cost-benefit analysis of leaders against war.¹¹ Other political scientists such as John Mearsheimer have offered variations on Waltz's theme, noting that controlled proliferation could in certain cases stabilize international politics.¹² Scott Sagan summarized this explanatory framework as the 'security model' for nuclear proliferation; security concerns, not domestic politics or normative goals drive proliferation decision-making.¹³

Under neo-realist theory, calculations about the relative balance of power between states dominate the explanatory logic applied to nuclear proliferation. Kurt Campbell captures this logic when he explains that the hegemonic power of the United States and the nature of its security policy constituted the most important factors for states in deciding whether or not to acquire nuclear weapons. Campbell stated unequivocally:

Perhaps the most important ingredient in a new international attractiveness – or perceived necessity – of acquiring nuclear weapons is the question of the future

direction of US foreign and security policy. For decades US friends and allies – such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Germany, Egypt and others – have come to depend on several aspects of American policy when making calculations about their own security and the question of forswearing nuclear weapons. These aspects include the stability of the American nuclear deterrent and US security guarantees; US rhetorical commitment to, active pursuit of, and participation in global non-proliferation policies and regimes; American restraint in publicly contemplating the use of nuclear weapons, particularly against a state that does not possess weapons of mass destruction; and US commitments not to decouple US security from that of its allies through the development of defensive systems.¹⁴

Campbell's logic draws upon the neo-realist argument by emphasizing the role that American hegemonic power plays in the calculations that states make to ensure their security. Using Campbell's neo-realist logic, it follows that states will exercise nuclear restraint as long as they believe that the distribution of power in the international system remains heavily weighted in favour of the United States. The second half of the equation is equally important – that American hegemonic power be credibly operationalized through a security policy that provides security guarantees backed by a full range of military tools, including an extended nuclear deterrent.¹⁵ Stated differently, states will exercise restraint and regard US commitments as credible so long as they believe that the United States continues to exercise preponderant power relative to other actors. The opposite is also true under the argument, i.e., that a structural change in the global balance of power that undermined American power would lead to a decline in the credibility of the American extended deterrent posture, thereby removing a restraint on nuclear proliferation. While Campbell nods in the direction of other variables, such as a breakdown in the NPT, the erosion of regional or global security, domestic imperatives, and the availability of technology, he sides with the neo-realists with his assertion that '[m]isgivings and concerns about the long-term direction of American policy on global strategy and nuclear policy are, and will continue to be, the single most decisive factor guiding the direction of would-be proliferators – both rogue and responsible'.¹⁶

In a variation on this theme, Benjamin Frankel argued in the early 1990s that nuclear proliferation was all but inevitable, suggesting that post-Cold War structural dynamics would give added impetus to nuclear proliferation.¹⁷ Frankel argued that Cold War nuclear guarantees extended by the United States and the Soviet Union represented a systemic and artificial restraint on the global demand for nuclear weapons. Frankel believed that the end of the Cold War would force a reversion of the international system back to its more true anarchical form, a shift that would exacerbate the security dilemma of all states. States' pursuit of security would inevitably take place within an international framework featuring increased technology flows that would spread weapons material and know-how around the world more easily than was the case during the Cold War. The result, according to Frankel, would be an acceleration in proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons and the inevitable erosion of the NPT.¹⁸

An enduring critique of the realist and neo-realist explanatory framework for proliferation (and other state behaviour) is the short shrift the theory accords to internal factors such as domestic politics, organizational and bureaucratic dynamics, and leadership perceptions in shaping state responses to security threats.¹⁹ Sagan drew upon these critiques in his argument that the explanatory power of the security model is incomplete: 'Nuclear weapons, like other weapons are more than tools of national security: they are political objects of considerable importance in domestic debates and internal bureaucratic struggles and can also serve as international normative symbols of modernity and identity.'²⁰ Sagan proposed additional domestic politics and norm-based models of nuclear proliferation. The former draws upon the insights of Morton Halperin, Graham Allison, and others that explain state actions as the result of an intra-governmental bargaining process between and among civilian and military organizations.²¹ As noted by Sagan, domestic political actors and communities can coalesce around interests and positions that shape the policies and programs of states in ways that can reinforce internal demand to acquire nuclear weapons.²² Acknowledging that the domestic politics model is incomplete and lacks theoretical depth, Sagan nonetheless encourages researchers to embrace an added layer of complexity introduced by these considerations into an explanatory framework of nuclear proliferation.²³

The neo-liberal critique goes further, rejecting the realist characterization of the systemic anarchy that inexorably propels states into friction in an environment governed by the balance of power and conflict. Instead it sees opportunity for cooperation and restraint. Neo-liberals argue that systemic anarchy can in certain circumstances lead to cooperation and international regimes that can constrain competition and conflict.²⁴ Drawing on ideas also associated with social constructivism, it holds that shared values and norms are the product of cooperation and their resulting norm-based regimes like the NPT can reduce the incentives for states to pursue nuclear weapons. Glen Chafetz articulated this point of view when he stated that 'the pacifying effects of democracy and complex interdependence mean that the number of states fearful or ambitious enough to seek nuclear weapons will decline rather than increase as a result of the end of the Cold War'.²⁵ According to Chafetz, the development of behavioural norms within established democracies would manifest themselves in the form of political structures and ideologies that would make like-minded states less apt to fall prey to the neo-realist bare-knuckled struggle for power and survival. These norms, Chafetz argues, would make states less drawn to nuclear weapons.²⁶

While some explanatory frameworks for proliferation factor in domestic political and cultural issues, there is a major debate over how much emphasis should be given to these factors. Sagan offered a third causal approach for nuclear proliferation studies – a normative model that emphasized the role of factors internal to the state, such as shared beliefs, symbols, and identity.²⁷ As noted by Sagan: 'According to this perspective, state behaviour is determined not by leaders' cold calculations about the national security interest or their parochial bureaucratic interests, but rather by deeper norms and shared beliefs about what actions are legitimate and appropriate in international relations.'²⁸ Others go much further. Peter Lavoy points to the importance

of 'myth makers' in the elites of states in helping to create belief that nuclear status can help solve a states' security problems.²⁹ Etel Solingen argues that in the Middle East domestic processes and institutions may play an important role in shaping the region's approach to nuclear weapons. While identity-based approaches highlight important variables, they are not essential to explaining the trends examined here, trends that appear highly consistent with neo-realist expectations.

Theory and Reality Collide: Recent Regional History

Neo-realist considerations offer a particularly powerful explanatory logic for nuclear decision-making in the Middle East, especially when alloyed to constructivist insights, as will be detailed later. The logic of neo-realism seems powerfully evident in deciphering the state response to the ascendance of the three regional hegemon (Israel, Iran, and Iraq) over a 25-year period and the conventional, unconventional, and nuclear capabilities in their respective arsenals. As if responding to a collective impulse, regional states simultaneously moved along what could be thought of as four logical lines of operation: they 1) acquired equivalent military capabilities; 2) formed regional alignments against or with the hegemon; 3) sought security guarantees from outside powers to offset the military advantages of the hegemon; and 4) sought to create a collective security framework to mitigate the threat and influence of the regional hegemon.

As neo-realist assumptions predict, the unstable and conflict-ridden regional environment created incentives for states to arm themselves through purchases of military equipment. Not surprisingly, the region has constituted the largest market for conventional arms in the developing world over much of the last 25 years. Recent figures illustrate this trend. According to the US Congressional Research Service, the Near East Region led the developing world in arms purchases, signing arms contracts valued at \$75.5 billion during the period 1998–2005.³⁰ The realist paradigm accurately predicted this behaviour. However, viewing arms purchases simply as a logical extension of state responses to their respective security dilemmas represents only part of the picture. Throughout the Middle East the security dilemma of regional states has always been more complicated than the realist paradigm would suggest, a complication that is applicable to the region's changing nuclear posture.

There is almost universal agreement that arms purchases throughout the region have not created credible conventional military capabilities. This is no accident. It can be argued that while Middle Eastern leaders spent lavishly on conventional arms, those arms were never primarily intended to provide credible conventional military capability to mitigate external threats. With the exception of Israel, the region's *conventional* militaries historically have been noted more for their incompetence rather than their military prowess.³¹ Regional regimes were motivated by a more important consideration than protecting states against external aggression: the overriding domestic political imperative to keep their conventional militaries weak to mitigate coup threats from their armed forces.³² Instead of protecting regimes from external threats, arms purchases served as vehicles to co-opt potential internal regime opponents while simultaneously addressing the more important purpose of

cementing political relations with outside powers. Saudi Arabia's \$65 billion of military equipment purchased from the United States under the foreign military sales program is the quintessential example of this regional phenomenon. Throughout the Middle East and Persian Gulf, state responses to external threats were systemically shaped by the contradictory objective of protecting themselves from internal threats as well as external adversaries. Regional regimes almost always chose to treat internal threats more seriously than external ones. One result of this calculation was that regional states lived in a perpetual military imbalance in relation to the regional hegemons.

Regional states similarly failed to see the value in cooperation as tool to manage their security dilemmas – a behaviour that should have logically followed from the neo-liberal paradigm. The explanation for this also partially lies with the overriding salience of internal threats to regional regimes. Had the regimes acted in accordance with neo-liberal theory to address their insecurity, they would have established a collective security framework as a vehicle to co-opt and balance hegemons. During the 1980s, fractious inter-state disputes and rivalries prevented Middle Eastern and Gulf states from creating effective political-military partnerships to address the systemic military imbalance created by the three regional hegemons. In the Levant, the Arab League never became an institution capable of unifying the states against common threats. The Gulf Cooperation Council created in 1981 similarly failed to mobilize member states into an effective balancing mechanism to counter either Iran or Iraq. Political scientist Greg Gause argues that during the period 1971–1991 the cost-benefit calculations driving decision-making on alliances in the Persian Gulf were driven more by perceived ideological and political threats rather than strictly by military power.³³ This calculus drove states into a complicated, dynamic series of inter-state relationships that lacked foundation and which fluctuated according to regional circumstance. While Gulf states acted as loyal allies to Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War, the tables turned less than two years after the war ended and they found themselves on the receiving end of Saddam's wrath. Interestingly, the most enduring regional partnership of the period has proved to be Iran's alliance of convenience with the secular Baath regime in Syria. That partnership has served as a means to further Iran's objectives in Lebanon and helped consolidate Hizbollah's capabilities to be used as a tool against Israel and the United States.

Over this complicated regional dynamic, most regional states simultaneously also sought and received security guarantees from the United States (or the Soviet Union prior to 1989) – particularly after the 1990–1991 Gulf War. While Jordan bucked the trend by aligning itself with Iraq during Gulf War, it rectified the situation soon after the conclusion of the war. At the end of the Gulf War, regional states generally relied upon security guarantees from the United States to address external threats – actions that are consistent with the neo-realist paradigm. The United States subsequently operationalized these guarantees through a series of bilateral defence cooperation agreements throughout the region with Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. A series of similarly structured agreements built up over the years between the United States and Saudi Arabia formalized the security partnership between these two states. These agreements committed the United States

to the defence of these countries, permitted American use of host-nation military facilities, addressed the legal status of American military personnel deployed in their countries, made provisions for pre-positioned military equipment, and set up a framework for arms sales and military exercises. During the 1990s, the United States built up a military infrastructure in the Gulf to operationalize these guarantees and implement the policy of dual containment. Under the framework, the US Navy built up its headquarters elements in Manama; the Air Force in Qatar; and the Army in Kuwait.

With the exception of having to buy American arms and bear some of the monetary costs associated with basing infrastructure, the security guarantees extended by the United States constituted politically low-cost arrangements for the regional states and allowed them to concentrate on their more serious internal threats. The first overt signs that the terms and conditions surrounding the security guarantees were not as politically cheap as regional governments had hoped first appeared in Saudi Arabia. Following attacks on US military facilities in 1995 and 1996, domestic pressure began building on the regime to end the presence of American military personnel at Prince Sultan Air Base – pressure that finally resulted in the departure of US operational forces from the Kingdom in 2003. In many respects, the House of Saud acted in ways that were consistent with the argument of this article – that internal threats and internal political dynamics played important shaping roles in the response of state leadership to their respective security dilemmas. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the removal of American forces after the 11 September attacks led to a more complicated political framework between Saudi Arabia and the United States that has undermined the nature of security guarantees that date to the 1950s.³⁴

The domestic imperative of the region's security dilemmas was most interestingly revealed in Saddam Hussein's successful efforts during the 1990s to convince the international community of the continued existence of his chemical and biological weapons programs. One of Saddam's primary target audiences for his deception program was internal regime opponents. Saddam perhaps correctly perceived that revealing he had actually disarmed would be interpreted as a sign of weakness and would embolden his internal opponents.³⁵

The relevance of behavioural norms and bureaucratic politics appears to have relatively limited importance in shaping the response of regional elites to their security dilemma. With the exception of Libya, none of the states ever developed significant internal bureaucratic or political constituencies (like India and Pakistan) that provided an added impetus to push governments towards robust nuclear programs.³⁶ This would obviate the logic of Sagan's domestic politics model throughout the region. Egypt actually abandoned its small nuclear program in 1986 following the Chernobyl disaster in the Soviet Union.

The dynamic security dilemma of regional states is reflected in the regional states' treatment of their respective nuclear postures. A surprising feature of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is the comparative restraint exercised by states for the last 50 years despite being at the centre of the globe's most persistent and enduring conflict and three major regional wars.³⁷ Regional states have lived under the threat of nuclear weapons at least since 1968 when it is believed that Israel achieved a nuclear

capability.³⁸ Other nearby states also boast nuclear weapons, with India exploding a device in 1974 and Pakistan in 1987 – yet this development did not spur regional proliferation either. The neo-realist paradigm accurately predicted the states' response to the regional environment – they opted to outsource their 'strategic' security to outside powers as a way to balance against each other and the region's nuclear power (Israel).

The historical context for regional restraint remains rooted in the outsourcing of 'strategic' security by states to outside powers that resulted in a series of cross-cutting security guarantees extended by the United States and the Soviet Union that date to the 1950s–1970s. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union carved up *de facto* regional alliance blocs glued together by nuclear guarantees. It is no exaggeration to note that various parts of the region have been under an implied nuclear umbrella for the last 50 years, which is one reason for the restraint at least in the nuclear realm.³⁹ As states demonstrated restraint in developing nuclear weapons, however, that restraint did not extend to other unconventional weapons. The period from 1970–2000 saw Syria, Iraq, and Iran all develop or acquire chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles that were directed at a variety of regional adversaries. Yet the existence of these programs and the actual use of unconventional weapons in the Iran–Iraq War and by Saddam against his internal opponents did not prompt a rush of regional states to the nuclear bar. Last, but not least – while Iran's march towards nuclear weapons appears to have accelerated during the past 36 months,⁴⁰ its nuclear ambitions as manifested by the very visible development of a redundant and sophisticated nuclear infrastructure have been transparent to all regional states for the last 30 years.⁴¹

Much is made of the region's rhetorical embrace support for declaring the region a Nuclear Free Weapons Zone (NFWZ) – an idea advanced at a variety of UN fora.⁴² It is difficult, however, to see that the embrace of this regional regime by the regional states constituted anything other than a political vehicle to publicly criticize Israel and, more recently, Iran. Stated differently, states embraced the rhetoric of the NFWZ but did not necessarily adopt and internalize the non-proliferation norms implicit in the regime. Iran, for example, embraced the NFWZ proposal as early as 1974 even as it sought its own nuclear capability under the Shah. The NFWZ proposal has provided recent political cover for Saudi Arabia and Egypt in their calls for restraint in Iran's nuclear program. It is hard to argue that the rhetorical embrace of this idea represented a meaningful endorsement of non-proliferation norm as states such as Iran, Iraq, and Libya all at various times have pursued their own nuclear weapons programs.⁴³

Back to the Future: Realism and Proliferation

Middle Eastern reactions to nuclearization generally, and Iranian nuclearization in particular, leave little support for many otherwise useful perspectives on proliferation issues. The neo-liberal model demonstrates poor explanatory logic, since regional states have never embraced or shown enduring interest in normative-based institutional structures as tools to manage their security. The model emphasizing internal

government politics is similarly lacking, since none of the regional states have developed internal organizations, bureaucracies, or other constituencies that exercised meaningful roles on national security considerations. All these issues remain the near-exclusive purview of the region's ruling elites. The evidence for behavioural norms in shaping leadership decisions is also lacking. There is little evidence that the regional domestic political constituencies forced the nuclear issue into a wider public consciousness and elevated its symbolic importance to make it somehow associated with national identity. The Muslim Brotherhood's statements in July 2006 calling on the Mubarak government to develop a nuclear deterrent, however, may mean that the norms/domestic politics model may have some explanatory power in Egypt's case.⁴⁴

The neo-realist paradigm, allied with insights from constructivist frameworks, can provide strong explanatory for the region's response to the Iran nuclear program. A compelling case can be made that a series of internal and external factors suggested by these paradigms have now combined to create a new 'critical mass' surrounding the nuclear issue. Due to changes in the global, regional, and intra-state environments, Middle Eastern states are now presented with a series of incentives that may militate against nuclear restraint. Ironically, these changes encourage states to confront the logic of the realist security dilemma that had been artificially held in check by their willingness to depend on security guarantees from outside powers.⁴⁵ While these security guarantees are far from being discarded, they are now being weakened by changing international domestic political dynamics pressuring governing elites from Rabat to Muscat:

- The perceived decline in American, global military power and political influence;⁴⁶
- The decline in American political influence throughout the region as a result of the Iraq invasion and its abandonment of constructive involvement in the Arab–Israeli dispute;
- The emergence of an alliance of powerful state and non-state actors: Iran, Syria, Hizbollah, Hamas, and various Shi'ite-based militias and political organizations in Iraq;
- Various of these actors have successfully inserted themselves into the position of representing a 'successful' resistance to Israel and the United States in Iraq, Lebanon, and the occupied territories; The new-found public legitimacy and popularity of these actors represents a profound challenge to the established ruling elites;
- Iran's defiance of the European Union, the United States, and the international community in what looks like an inexorable march towards a nuclear weapons capability;
- Strengthened Islamist political movements that must be accommodated in various ways by regional regimes;
- Regional oil producers, still dependent on US military protection, but building political, economic, and military partnerships with outside powers such as China, India, and Russia;

- A public that is virulently anti-American, anti-Israel, and increasingly see little distinction between either.

All of the characteristics of the new regional distribution of power have combined to create circumstances that are reducing the incentives for states to show nuclear restraint and increasing the attractiveness of embracing a more ambiguous nuclear posture. The altered distribution of power features external and internal dynamics that have combined to force leaders to address external threats in ways that are now inexorably being shaped by internal politics. Where before these two competing priorities could be pursued independently by regional elites, it is now no longer possible for states keep the external and internal threats separated. This new dynamic is being shaped by a variety of forces. At the global level, there is a general perception that the United States' power and influence is on the wane. Polling data over the last five years indicates the steady erosion of popular support for the United States around the world – a critical factor limiting the ability of the United States to exert global leadership.⁴⁷ Reflecting this decline, states around the world, particularly those in the Middle East, confront significant domestic political costs to maintain a supportive relationship with the United States. This phenomenon is vividly on display in Iraq, in which no regional state has accepted a direct role in trying to stabilize the country. Instead of demonstrating American strength and power, the situation in Iraq is undermining it and the credibility of the security guarantees that have been relied upon by Middle Eastern states as their primary instrument for protection against external adversaries. The perceived decline in American power has combined with a domestic political environment that is virulently anti-American throughout the region. A 2006 Zogby/University of Maryland poll drawn from Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan revealed that approximately 70 per cent of all respondents believe that the United States and Israel represent the most serious threats to regional security.⁴⁸ Another particularly chilling indicator for regional elites: the same polling data indicated that Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has become the most popular leader in the Middle East.⁴⁹

Deprived of the protective security umbrella provided by United States guarantees and facing a restive and anti-American/anti-Israel public, regional regimes simultaneously confront a threatening external environment that consists of an unstable Iraq, a potentially nuclear-armed Iran, and an Iranian-headed regional alliance of state and non-state actors ranging from Baghdad to Beirut. Regional elites also see the prospect of an Iranian-allied state in Iraq after the US inevitably departs and the creation of a powerful nexus of non-state Shi-ite and Sunni militias looking for other regional climes in which to ply their destructive trade. The military prowess shown by Hizbollah against Israel in Lebanon in August 2006 and the military capabilities of insurgent groups in Iraq provide a stark and threatening contrast to the traditional conventional military incompetence in the surrounding states.

Embracing the prospect of peaceful nuclear energy provides regional regimes with a low-cost step towards a more ambiguous nuclear stance. Taking this step addresses the new regional distribution of power in a number of important ways, signalling a variety of different actors with a variety of different messages:

- It reinforces the message to Tehran that regional states are not prepared to stand by idly and see a nuclear-armed and regionally dominant Iran establish a coercive political-military framework to intimidate the region. The region's new nuclear posture must be seen as a hedged response to Iran;
- It signals to outside powers such as Russia, China, and India that the era of American regional hegemony is drawing to a close and that outside powers now have an opportunity to build political, military, and economic partnerships in which cooperation on nuclear programs can be one supportive element in a broader integrated relationship;
- It sends a variety of messages to the United States, including: 1) the overriding importance of forestalling Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons; 2) a clear demonstration of the region's exasperation with American policy under the Bush administration; 3) a signal that it may not be possible to revert to 'business as usual' between Washington and regional capitals; and 4) that Washington potentially has time to try and resolve these issues, since it will be at least 5–7 years before regional states' nuclear programs can be realistically established;
- It demonstrates to domestic constituencies that their governments are no longer dependent on American security guarantees or exist under the nuclear shadow of Tel Aviv or Tehran;
- Moving to a latent nuclear status allows Arab countries to signal to Israel that they can achieve nuclear weapons capability on short notice, ending Israel's regional monopoly;
- Administering nuclear programs under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision allows the regional states to cloak their programs in an aura of legitimacy, which means they can continue to use Israel's and Iran's continued non-compliance with the NPT to political advantage in the international arena.

The neo-realist framework places the embrace of a new nuclear posture in the context of an altered distribution of power that mitigates against a position of nuclear restraint. States are reacting to this altered distribution of power and the erosion of US power exactly as the realist paradigm would suggest: the Sunni states of the Gulf and the Middle East are collectively taking steps to signal to the both the intra-regional hegemony – Israel and Iran – that they are prepared to respond in kind if necessary. They are also signalling the outside provider of security – the United States – that they have lost confidence in Washington's security guarantees.

Implications

The analysis presented here argues that neo-realism offers powerful explanatory logic in predicting regional responses to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and that internal issues as religion and culture, for example, are not particularly important forces in shaping regime decision-making. It also suggests that attempting to stop Iran's accession to the nuclear club is the critical variable in preventing a regional nuclear arms race. If Iran is not stopped, the logic of the argument suggests that states will face

significant pressure to take corresponding steps to ensure their own deterrent capability. The neo-realist logic suggests a number of policy options for regional states, the United States, and the wider international community as they attempt to stop Iran's program and mitigate the prospect of a regional nuclear cascade.

A first task is to address perceptions of a changed distribution of regional power by assuring states that Iran will be unable in any circumstances to create a coercive bargaining framework leveraged by nuclear weapons. This can be accomplished by reconfiguring the region's security umbrella to reduce the visibility of the United States and by drawing in active political and military participation by a variety of regional and outside powers under a cooperative, alliance-like framework.⁵⁰ Such an arrangement would help reinforce perceptions that the balance of power had been restored and would simultaneously ease the domestic political problems experienced by the regimes due their close ties to the United States. This approach addresses the article's main argument that regional regime decision-making is being shaped by a changing security dilemma that is forcing them away from outsourcing their external security to a single hegemon – the United States.

Another aspect of the reconfigured security umbrella would involve a re-thinking of the functions of deterrence and extended deterrence from outside powers such as France and the United Kingdom. A reconfigured security umbrella could include explicit security nuclear deterrent guarantees by outside nuclear powers as another way to militate against the prospect of states seeking their own deterrent capability. The United States, for example, has in recent years sought to invigorate its regional security partnerships through the Gulf Security Dialogue launched in May 2006. The initiative repackaged ongoing activities such as arms sales, military exercises, and military training and basing issues as one way to highlight the continued American commitment to regional stability.⁵¹ That dialogue could be broadened to draw in regional militaries and interested outside powers such as India, France and Great Britain into an integrated political-military partnership with the regional states.

Concurrently efforts should be mounted to strengthen the existing non-proliferation regime through encouraging more widespread adoption of the IAEA's Additional Protocol and additional steps to strengthen the IAEA safeguards regime as one way to restore transparency and confidence in the NPT by regional states. All efforts to strengthen the existing regime should be supplemented by concerted efforts to better regulate uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing technologies – which are currently unrestricted by the NPT.⁵² A re-energized NPT can be an important component in providing assurance to regional states that the NPT regime can be one element in a comprehensive framework to place regional security on a more secure footing.

Finally, a way must be found to bring discussion of Israel's nuclear program as well as its legitimate security concerns under the auspices of a wider regional security dialogue that includes all regional states. A return to the 1990s ACRS process – the multilateral dialogue on Arms Control and Regional Security – may be in order as a basis to increase transparency and confidence between regional states.

While this analysis suggests that the neo-realism and constructivist approaches offer a sufficient guide for regional policy-making, other approaches offer valuable

insights. The pursuit of nuclear power in the region represents only the beginning of internal political and governmental debates over the direction of the respective programs in each of the states. As part of this process, internal constituencies will form on various sides of the issue. As Sagan suggests, domestic politics, bureaucracies, and other internal structures will inevitably become vested in the nuclear program, which will provide bureaucratic momentum pushing the program forward. Perhaps most dangerous, however, is the degree to which the nuclear programs take on symbolic importance. Should the general public embrace the state's nuclear power program as symbol of national identity, there is little chance of outside powers affecting the final outcome. If Egyptian public opinion comes to endorse the position of the Muslim Brotherhood's Dr Hamdi Hassan that Egyptians 'are ready to starve in order to own a nuclear weapon that will represent a real deterrent and will be decisive in the Arab-Israeli conflict',⁵³ then outside powers can only delay but not stop the program. The same calculus is true for all regional states. The United States and other interested parties are presented with the opportunity to affect the internal debate in all these regional states, but this window will not remain open indefinitely.

Conclusion

This article argues that established strands of international relations theory can provide useful insights to policy-makers as they seek to prevent the Middle East from careening down a path into a new nuclear arms race. While this analysis argues that neo-realism offers provides a particularly valuable tool to policy-makers, it would be a mistake to exclude alternative approaches as analytical tools. The Middle East today offers a rich environment to test all approaches for explaining policy choices and evaluating their implications for security policy.

The judgment presented here is that that regional state are re-examining their nuclear postures due to changes in the regional distribution of power that features powerful and new domestic political forces that must now be accommodated by the regimes as they address external threats to state security. Policy prescriptions flowing from this analysis imply that outside powers and regional regimes must forcefully address perceptions of the changed regional distribution of power by creating a new and more stable regional security framework to forestall the possibility of a new nuclear arms race. One of the implications of the analysis is that that no one state can undertake this monumental task – it must involve a variety of global actors.⁵⁴

The answer to the question posed in the article's title is that the region is not necessarily at a nuclear tipping point; it still is too early to reliably predict whether Arab states inevitably will seek to develop and/or acquire nuclear weapons in response to Iran's actions. The United States, the European Union, and the international community must realize that a Middle East with a series of new nuclear states is not inevitable and that steps can be taken to keep these states from proceeding down the nuclear path. Reinforcing non-proliferation norms in combination with a mix of policies aimed at the internal and external dynamics shaping the regional

security environment can successfully prevent the nuclear cascade that many fear is about to engulf the region.

Disclaimer

The views in this article are those of the author alone and do not represent the policy of the US Navy or the US government.

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NOTES

1. *Chain Reaction: Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East*. Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 110-34, 110th Congress, 2nd Session, February 2008, p. viii.
2. As argued in Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, 'A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbors', *Survival*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (June 2007) pp. 111–28.
3. As noted in *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East: In the Shadow of Iran* (London: IISS, 2008), p. 7.
4. As asserted by Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal in Mariam Hakeem, 'GCC's Nuclear Programme Will be a Role Model', *Gulf News*, 14 January 2007 at <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/07/01/14/10096775.html>.
5. Joby Warrick, 'Spread of Nuclear Capability is Feared', *Washington Post*, 12 May 2008, p. A1.
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9. Perhaps the best summary and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these frameworks is contained in Ogilvie-White, 'Is There a Theory of Nuclear Proliferation?' (note 6). Also see, Scott Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?', *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1997) pp. 54–86; Zachary Davis and Benjamin Frankel (eds), *The Proliferation Puzzle: Why Nuclear Weapons Spread and What Results* (London: Frank Cass, 1993); Campbell, Einhorn, and Reiss, *The Nuclear Tipping Point* (note 7); John Deutch, 'The New Nuclear Threat', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 41 (Fall 1992); Steven M. Meyer, *The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
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11. Kenneth Waltz, 'The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: Why More May Be Better', *Adelphi Paper* No. 171, (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).
12. John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993).
13. Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?' (note 9), p. 57.
14. Kurt M. Campbell, 'Reconsidering a Nuclear Future', in Campbell, Einhorn, and Reiss, *The Nuclear Tipping Point* (note 7), pp. 20–1.
15. Problematic application of the reconfigured US strategic deterrent in the Middle East is covered in James A. Russell, 'Nuclear Strategy and the Modern Middle East', *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 98–117. Also see Kathleen J. McInnis, 'Extended Deterrence: The US Credibility Gap in the Middle East', *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 169–86.
16. Campbell, 'Reconsidering a Nuclear Future' (note 14), p. 29.

17. Benjamin Frankel, 'The Brooding Shadow: Systemic Incentives and Nuclear Weapons Proliferation', in Davis and Frankel, *The Proliferation Puzzle* (note 9), pp. 37–78.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 60–1. A similar conclusion is by John Mearsheimer in predicting nuclear proliferation in Europe in 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War', *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56.
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20. Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?' (note 9), p. 55.
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26. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
27. Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?' (note 9), pp. 73–4.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Peter Lavoy, 'Nuclear Myths and the Causes of Proliferation', *Security Studies*, Vol. 2, Nos. 3–4 (September 1993) pp. 192–212.
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31. I am not arguing that regional substate actors have not developed credible military capacities – a variety of groups have demonstrated credible capabilities in asymmetric warfare. Hizbollah, for example, demonstrated credible semi-conventional military capabilities during Israel's August 2006 invasion of Lebanon. Arguments that regional militaries have not developed credible conventional military forces are summarized in Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
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33. Greg Gause, 'Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf', *Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter 2003/4), pp. 273–305. Gause argues that '[Gulf] states overwhelmingly identified ideological and political threats emanating from abroad to the domestic stability of their ruling regimes as more salient than threats based upon aggregate power, geographic proximity and offensive capabilities' (p. 274). Also see Darryl Priess, 'Balance of Threat Theory and the Genesis of the Gulf Cooperation Council', *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Summer 1996), pp. 143–71.
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 38. Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press 1998).
 39. Application of the US nuclear deterrent in the Middle is explored further in Russell, 'Nuclear Strategy and the Modern Middle East' (note 15).
 40. On 14 May 2007, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors found that Iraq was enriching uranium on a far wider scale than had previously been realized. Details in David Sanger, 'Inspectors Cite Big Gain by Iran on Nuclear Fuel', *New York Times*, 15 May 2007 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/15/world/middleeast/15iran.html>.
 41. The history and motivations of regional states' involvement in development of chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles is covered in James A. Russell (ed.), *WMD Proliferation in the Middle East: Directions and Policy Options in the New Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2006). Also see Sami Hajjar, 'Regional Perspectives on the Causes of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East', *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January/March 2000), pp. 35–56; Gawdat Bahgat, 'Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East: Iran and Israel', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (April 2005), pp. 25–43.
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 43. Endemic problems in the NWFZ proposals in the Middle East are discussed in *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East* (note 3), p. 158.
 44. Sammy Salama and Khalid Hilal, 'Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Presses Government for Nuclear Weapons', *WMD Insights*, November 2006.
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 48. Zogby International Annual Arab 2006 Public Opinion Survey, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/comm/events/2006Lebanon.pdf>.
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 52. This and a variety of initiatives to strengthen the NPT are detailed in *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East* (note 3), pp. 151–62.
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