



Special Issue on Extended Deterrence, Security Guarantees, and Nuclear Proliferation: Strategic Stability in the Gulf Region

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This special issue of Strategic Insights will continue our exploration of extended deterrence that began in our Fall 2009 issue. Its articles reflect the latest research as presented at the workshop on Extended Deterrence, Security Guarantees, and Nuclear Proliferation: Strategic Stability in the Gulf Region held at the Gulf Research Center, held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on October 4-5, 2009.

The feature articles presented in this issue consider the role of nuclear weapons in sustaining or undermining the security of the Gulf region. Their focus is on three linked concepts: extended deterrence, security guarantees, and nuclear proliferation, and their 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 that the spread of nuclear weapons would complicate their relationship with each other, and make it more dangerous. Each accordingly declared itself willing to extend the protection of its nuclear arsenal to allies and clients. The widespread acceptance of this idea may seem surprising, to the extent that 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 of the United States nor the USSR could tolerate the loss of prestige and credibility that would follow an unavenged nuclear attack on one of its partners. As a consequence, the concept of extended deterrence proved robust. Even states for which nuclear weapons were within easy technological reach generally judged that the risk of owning them was greater than that of trusting the protection afforded by established nuclear powers.

Extended deterrence was supported by a system of security guarantees, most of which were of a familiar and traditional kind: a declared willingness by states to cooperate in each other's defense, and to fight side-by-side in given circumstances. In the nuclear era, however, a new form of guarantee was introduced, one that was extended not merely to friends but to rivals and adversaries as well. States known to possess nuclear weapons promised not to employ them against any that did not, in exchange for a countervailing promise that states without nuclear weapons would not attempt to obtain them. This exchange of promises lies at the heart of the nuclear non-proliferation regime established in 1968.

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

These articles seek 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 EU to China. Two of them—Israel and the United States—are thought to have developed plans for direct military intervention against Iranian nuclear facilities, in the event that diplomacy fails to halt Teheran’s weapons program (whose existence Teheran denies).

Such intervention, needless to say, would be profoundly destabilizing for the rest of the Gulf. So too would Iranian success. Saudi Arabia in particular is thought likely to seek its own independent nuclear deterrent to counter an Iranian nuclear arsenal (as might Egypt, slightly farther afield). While other Gulf states may not view the Iranian 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 is not strong—though the fact that the Iranians have explained their own interest in nuclear technology in terms of a desire for nuclear energy has muddied the water 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 the Iranians have 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, and 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 United States and other major powers, is regarded as an affront by other governments in the region, and also, perhaps, as a model for emulation. The Israelis, for their part, have a proven track record of military action to forestall the development of nuclear weapons by their neighbors, having demolished nascent nuclear programs in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007) without apparent consequence to themselves. Few doubt their capacity 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 non-proliferation 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 governments 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 effects 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.

Since the end of the Second World War protection from external threats in the Gulf region, for practical purposes, has been assured by 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, in any event, is stronger than ever; yet it is unclear, absent the overarching external threat posed by the Soviets, what kinds of policies it can support on its own.

The aim of this special issue is to therefore 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 Gulf. In this special issue, we present the following articles:

- James Acton, [Extended Deterrence and Communicating Resolve](#)
- James A. Russell, [Extended Deterrence, Security Guarantees and Nuclear Weapons: US Strategic and Policy Conundrums in the Gulf](#)
- Bruno Tertrais, [Security Guarantees and Extended Deterrence in the Gulf Region: A European Perspective](#)
- Shahram Chubin, [Extended Deterrence and Iran](#)
- Lewis A. Dunn, [Strategic Reassurance if Iran “Goes Nuclear”: A Framework and Some Propositions](#)

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, are far wider than they used to be. So too are the range of threats against which deterrence must be “extended” to include not just the emergence of regional nuclear powers, but the suppression of conventional conflict, terrorism, subversion, and internal unrest as well.

Certainly whatever strategies are adopted in the nuclear arena cannot be obviously incompatible with the requirements of these other realms, in which the threats, while smaller, are also more immediate.

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