



Security Guarantees and Extended Deterrence in the Gulf Region: A European Perspective

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Extended Deterrence and Security Guarantees

Extended deterrence consists in extending the logic of deterrence to a third party, that is, persuading a potential adversary that the costs of attacking a protected country would exceed its benefits through a security guarantee given to the protected party. To a large degree, it stems from any form of military alliance between a stronger country and a weaker one—although alliances per se generally include a mutual defense commitment, which is not a prerequisite to extended deterrence.

Extended deterrence may translate into various kinds of arrangements. At one end of the spectrum, extended deterrence may rely on mere unilateral statements of protection. At the other end, it may rely on the permanent presence of nuclear weapons on the protected country's territory. In between is often a web of policy statements, consultations mechanisms, joint exercises and planning, defense cooperation, ports visits, and presence of foreign troops—varying from country to country. If the protector has nuclear weapons, extended deterrence may become, explicitly or not, a form of extended nuclear deterrence. But the protector may have an interest in maintaining ambiguity on this point. Any State aggressor foolish enough to confront a nuclear-armed protector would do it at its own peril.

A security guarantee given by a nuclear protector can be a useful nuclear-nonproliferation measure. This is the main function of what is called today “assurance” in the United States. Whereas the credibility of the “deterrence” part of a security guarantee is to be appreciated by the potential adversaries, the credibility of its assurance part is to be appreciated by the protected country. The lack of a strong security guarantee, or doubts about the scope and value of an existing one, have been key drivers of nuclear proliferation since 1949. China, France, Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea and South Africa did not benefit from a security guarantee (or did not consider it as being credible) when they went nuclear. For countries which are known to have embarked in a nuclear program—or to have seriously entertained the thought—the question of security guarantees also loomed large. Most did not benefit from such a guarantee at all, or felt that it was weakening; and most of those who gave up their nuclear option in the face of a clear threat only did so when they felt reassured that they would be adequately protected, formally or not. The fact is that countries that considered or embarked in a nuclear program did not benefit from a credible security guarantee, and most of those countries who gave up the nuclear option in the face of a threat benefited from such a guarantee. This quasi-universal correlation suggests that such guarantees are critical as a nuclear non-proliferation measure.

The requirements of deterrence and assurance may not be identical. A modest conventional presence on the protected country's territory, for instance, may be enough as a "trip-wire" or as a symbol of commitment—thus providing significant assurance, but not necessarily enough deterrence. Conversely, a very small chance of nuclear use to protect an ally may be enough to convince an adversary that the cost would not be worth it—thus providing significant deterrence, but not necessarily enough assurance. The NATO Cold War doctrine of flexible response was an attempt to bridge the gap between these two different requirements. It also sought to resolve a dilemma which is at the heart of extended deterrence: simultaneously reducing what a U.S. expert recently called the twin fears of "entrapment" (for the protector) and "abandonment" (for the protected).[1]

The international debate on extended deterrence is mostly about the scope, role and value of American security commitments. It is generally acknowledged that Washington has given nuclear security guarantees to about 30 countries, including North Atlantic Treaty (NATO) member States, Japan and South Korea. Whether or not other U.S. allies, bound to Washington by treaty (such as Australia, Thailand and the Philippines) or by statements of commitment (such as Israel, Taiwan) can be considered as covered by a nuclear umbrella is left unsaid, in some cases deliberately so.[2] There is no clear distinction in these matters, and ambiguity is part of deterrence.

Extended Deterrence in the Gulf Region

The United States is the main external security provider in the Gulf region. However, there is no treaty-based security guarantee given to US allies in the area. The existence of such a guarantee stems essentially from a range of unilateral American statements, bilateral security agreements, and the presence of U.S. military forces in the region. As early as 1945, the United States informally committed itself to be the guarantor of Saudi Arabia's security. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, fears of a "push towards the South" led President Jimmy Carter to affirm in January 1980 that "any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." [3]

Today, there is a U.S. military presence in Bahrain, which hosts the US Fifth Fleet, and in Qatar, which hosts US Central Command (CENTCOM) facilities. Bahrain and Kuwait have also been granted the status of "Major Non-NATO Allies," respectively in 2002 and 2004. Reinforced security guarantees were given to countries of the Gulf region after the 1990-1991 Iraq war. As a result, there is now an informal or de facto commitment to defend several of the Gulf States.

However, since 2003, the picture has changed. Most US land forces left the Arabian Peninsula invasion of Iraq, the performance of the United States is seen as less than satisfying, and other powers (China in particular) have increased their influence. The so-called "Shi'a revival," combined with growing evidence of Iranian nuclear intentions (along with the development of an increasingly mature ballistic missiles program), have led to a renewal of the debate on extended deterrence in the Gulf region.

It is important to note that in this regard the situation in the Middle East differs from the two other main regions where the United States has an extended deterrence policy, namely Europe and East Asia. In both these regions, there are treaty-based commitments to defend allies; in addition, numerous US statements over the years have made it clear that the nuclear component was part of this extended deterrence policy. The post-1991 agreements reportedly "do not formally require the United States to come to the aid of any of the Gulf states if they are attacked, according to U.S. officials familiar with their contents." [4]

Many analysts—not only in Washington—fear that failing to reassure Gulf allies may lead them to look for alternative strategic options to ensure their security. Despite its very limited capabilities in the nuclear field, Saudi Arabia often tops the list of three or four countries which could “go nuclear” if and when Iran does. As a second-best option, Saudi Arabia could ask Pakistan, a country with which it has had a very close relationship for decades, to give it a nuclear guarantee. Such a guarantee could even be entrenched by the presence of Pakistani nuclear weapons on Saudi soil but remaining under Islamabad’s control, thus mimicking the NATO “nuclear sharing” arrangements. Pakistan could consider that such an arrangement would have advantages in terms of the survivability of its arsenal: weapons stationed in the Arabian Peninsula would pose a major political and operational challenge for New-Delhi and probably negate its preemptive strike options. While Islamabad and Riyadh both have friendly relations with the West, such a radical change in the nuclear picture may have unforeseen and unwanted consequences.

For their part, many US allies fear that the evolving Iranian nuclear crisis could only have negative consequences for them: either Iran will end up having the Bomb, or the United States will end up making a “grand bargain” with Tehran. Both outcomes would be losing propositions from the point of view of Gulf countries, leading them to lose faith in the value of U.S. protection. Some in the region have also noticed that the United States has renewed its commitment to the security of Israel in a forceful way during the Bush presidency, and do not want to feel “left out.”^[5]

For these reasons, Washington has been keen in recent years on reassuring its allies on its commitment to their security, including by approving additional sales of military equipment and missile defense. Many authors have called for an explicit reinforcement of security guarantees to U.S. allies.^[6] But so far Washington has adopted a fairly prudent attitude. The most explicit public statement so far in that regard has been US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s much noticed proposal (in fact, more likely a trial balloon) of a “defense umbrella.”^[7] It is to be noted that many in the Middle East have interpreted this carefully worded expression as being akin to a “nuclear protection.”^[8]

The United States seems to hope that extended deterrence could also perhaps have a “dissuasion” role. This is what Mrs. Clinton sought by stating that a defense umbrella over the Middle East would negate a possible Iranian nuclear capability, thus apparently hoping to discourage Tehran to build the Bomb.

Reinforcing Extended Deterrence in the Gulf: Problems and Dilemmas

The reinforcement of security guarantees raises significant problems and dilemmas, which have been studied at length during the Cold war, in particular in Europe. How to avoid the “free-riding” problem of collective defense? How to ensure that assurances of protection are not interpreted by States in the region as a green light for regional military adventures?^[9]

However, the Gulf is very different from early Cold War Europe, and presents specific challenges.

1. First, both Washington and its Gulf allies do not want to appear as if they have given up on persuading Iran to roll back its nuclear program. This is one reason why Mrs. Clinton’s speech was coldly received among some elites of the region.
2. Second, since the end of the Cold war, and most importantly since the September 11 attacks, questions have been raised in the United States about the wisdom to continue giving protection to countries whose values are seen as being different or not compatible with those of the West. The fact that a majority of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks came from Saudi Arabia is well-remembered by the U.S. public opinion. The idea of “dying for Berlin” of “trading Washington for London” was difficult enough a challenge at the time of the Cold War; nobody should expect U.S. elites to be ready to “die for Dubai” or “trade Washington for Riyadh.”

3. Third, the problem may also exist the other way round. Some countries may not want to be too openly and explicitly protected by the United States. A formal security guarantee to Saudi Arabia, for instance, which would mean admitting reliance on the United States for its security, may be challenged from within.^[10] It might be seen in the region as an act of “colonialism.”^[11] Also, many in the Middle East do not want an open US nuclear guarantee for fear that it would mean being considered by Iran as an enemy. The Egyptian reaction to the US idea was revealing. Cairo has made it clear that it would not want to be part of such an arrangement—probably for a mix of domestic and diplomatic reasons. After Mrs. Clinton’s statement, President Mubarak stated that Egypt “will not be part of any American nuclear umbrella intended to protect the Gulf countries,” judging that it would imply “accepting foreign troops and experts on our land—and we do not accept that” and “an explicit acceptance that there is a regional nuclear power—we do not accept that either.”^[12]

For these reasons, no “Cold War Europe”-like quick fix is available for bolstering extended deterrence in the Gulf. Some experts have called for caution, for instance, in any overt deployment of large additional U.S. forces in the region to bolster the U.S. security commitment.^[13] (To be sure, there does not seem to be any overt call for such reinforcements from regional elites.)

There may thus be some value in maintaining a measure of ambiguity in U.S. security guarantees to the Gulf countries. This supposes of course that leaders of Gulf countries feel reassured by private statements of assurance by the U.S. administration. And here, there may be a measure of cultural specificity at work. Contrary to what is the case in Europe and East Asia, Gulf leaders, according to Emile Hokayem, an international affairs commentator based in Abu Dhabi, may “prefer to live with the current ambiguity, where they know what to expect from the U.S. because of very high-level personalized diplomacy, and not announce anything formal that would further that would further alienate Iran.”^[14] He judges that a nuclear umbrella “adds nothing to the current U.S. defense commitment in the region and denies everyone the ambiguity needed to deal with Tehran.”^[15] For these reasons, he calls for “an assurance along the same lines conveyed secretly to the Gulf leaderships by the most senior U.S. officials.”^[16]

The problem, of course, is that deterrence also requires a measure of clarity to ensure that the message is loudly and clearly heard by potential adversaries. Squaring this circle is the main challenge for U.S. diplomacy in the months and years to come.^[17]

In the Gulf region, extended deterrence is a particularly acute challenge, where it will be particularly difficult to simultaneously satisfy the requirements of “deterrence” (vis-à-vis potential adversaries), “reassurance” (vis-à-vis friendly governments), and “acceptability” (vis-à-vis their public opinions). For these reasons, rather than a new, forceful blanket public statement (a new “Carter doctrine”), country-specific arrangements and declarations may be a more appropriate options. They would have to be backed by enhanced mechanisms for combined (multinational) joint military planning.

Some doubt that an open defense umbrella would have any credibility for the smaller Gulf States given their size and proximity to Iran. According to Mustafa Alani, a prominent expert based in Dubai, “This state is very small. If the Iranian attack happens, this state will disappear in five seconds, so what is the umbrella going to do?”^[18] In other words, the belief in the value of the U.S. deterrent does not appear to be universally shared in the region. However, is there a serious alternative?^[19] Europe appears to play a complementary role here—despite the fact that it is also a US competitor for lucrative arms deals—but is no substitute for the U.S. protection.

European Security Commitments in the Gulf Region

For historical, geographical, economic and strategic reasons, Europe cannot remain indifferent to the security of the Gulf area. The European Union imports 21.1% of its oil from the Middle East (including 9.0% from Saudi Arabia and 6.4% from Iran)^[20], and many European countries are increasingly looking at the Gulf region as a gas provider to reduce their dependency on Russia. After years of negotiations, a GCC-EU free trade agreement is expected to be signed in 2009 or 2010. The first-ever common European military operations were conducted in the Gulf (Operation Cleansweep, 1987-1988).

European powers have given security guarantees in various forms to several Gulf States after the 1991 Gulf war. In addition to its longstanding commitment to the security of Djibouti (1977), France has signed several defense agreements with Kuwait (1992), Qatar (1994, 1998), and the United Arab Emirates (1996, 2009). The content of these agreements has not been made public and is said to vary from one instance to another—they are country-specific. However, various official statements make it possible to give a sense of their content. Through the agreement with Kuwait, for instance, Paris has “committed itself to guarantee the security of this country,” according to the French Foreign Ministry.^[21] Likewise, a parliamentary report stated that the agreement with Qatar “committed France to participate, under certain conditions, to the defense of Qatar against an external aggression.”^[22]

It is generally acknowledged that the French bilateral agreement with the UAE is particularly strong. As revised in 2009, it states, according to President Sarkozy, that the two countries “would jointly decide of specific and tailored responses, including military ones, if the security, the sovereignty, the territorial integrity and the independence of the UAE was threatened.”^[23]

This should not come as a surprise given that the UAE has become one of the main strategic partners of France in recent years (along with Qatar) in the region. The opening in May 2009 of a permanent joint base in Abu Dhabi is a milestone for Paris, since all other French permanent bases abroad are hosted by former colonies and are a legacy of history.^[24] It followed a string of bilateral agreements with the UAE in the cultural and education field, through which the French have “franchised” some of their most cherished trademarks: the Louvre museum, the Sorbonne University, and the Saint-Cyr military school.^[25] Additionally, Paris has made a bid for the sale of two latest-generation EPR nuclear reactors to the Emirates—the only Middle East country to which it seriously envisions to sell such reactor.

Today French Mirage aircraft participate in the air defense of the Emirates, acting as a de facto “trip wire” for the broader involvement of the French armed forces in case of conflict. As an official put it bluntly, “if Iran attacked, we would be attacked too.”^[26] At the occasion of the inauguration of the Abu Dhabi base, questions were raised about whether or not the new agreement included provisions for nuclear defense of the Emirates, especially since presidential advisers said that this was about “deterrence.”^[27] The French Ministry of Defense was quick to clarify that the French nuclear doctrine was unchanged: a “detering presence” should not be confused with “nuclear deterrence”; as in the past, nuclear weapons could only be used for the defense of French “vital” interests, and it would be up to the President to decide whether or not such interests were at stake in a Gulf contingency.^[28]

The United Kingdom also has its own defense commitments, notably with the UAE (1996). The Foreign and Commonwealth Office states that “our Defence Cooperation Agreement represents our largest defence commitment outside NATO.”^[29] Ivan Levis, UK Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, confirmed in 2009 that “the UAE is one of the UK’s closest allies.”^[30]

The role of the French and UK extended deterrence postures in the Gulf can be, to some extent, compared with their role in NATO (with the caveats that the role of their nuclear forces is openly acknowledged in the Atlantic Alliance context). They complement the US security guarantees without being a possible alternative to it: their existence would complicate the calculations of a potential adversary. Moreover, perceptions of French (and to a certain extent UK) actions in the region do not suffer from the same negative connotations of U.S. "imperialism." UK and French cooperation enhance the "internationalization" of Gulf security policies, something that many among the regional elites appreciate.

It is clear that among Gulf countries, the United Arab Emirates have a special place given the strength of UK and French commitments there.^[31] Thus any aggressor threatening the UAE has to know that he could face not just which would have to face not one, but three major Western military players, which are also nuclear powers and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

The Question of US-UK-French Coordination

These developments raise the question of whether—and if yes to which extent—the deterrence postures and declaratory policies of the United States, the United Kingdom and France in the region should be better coordinated. There would certainly be clear merit in having close trilateral consultation and perhaps even joint generic military planning for responding to an aggression in the Gulf. France's decision to rejoin the NATO military structure in 2009 would probably help here (even though there is no reason why NATO as such would be involved^[32]). On the question of a possible joint public deterrence statement, however, there are arguments on both sides. A clear collective expression of intent by Washington, Paris and London to protect their allies may be a powerful deterrent. But there could also be some value in letting potential adversaries wonder what each country's reactions and possible "red lines" would be. In any case, an in-depth conversation between the three countries on possible scenarios and planning for a major military contingency in the Gulf is long overdue.

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1. George Perkovich, *Extended Deterrence on the Way to a Nuclear-Free World*, International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, May 2009.
2. The U.S. State Department considers that Washington has made formal defense commitments to a total of 48 countries (personal source).
3. Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address, 23 January 1980. The principle of such a pledge had been agreed upon a few weeks before the invasion of Afghanistan (Zbigniew Brzezinski, "NSC Agenda, December 4, 1979," Memorandum for the President, 3 December 1974).
4. Post-1991 agreements: Kenneth Katzman, *The Persian Gulf States: Post-War Issues for U.S. Policy*, 2003, CRS Report For Congress, 14 July 2003.

5. This point was made by some participants in the IISS-sponsored "Manama Dialogue" held in Bahrain in December 2008.

6. For instance, "The United States should be ready to offer robust security guarantees and cooperation ... to address the security concerns that would lead Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or any other regional state to consider such proliferation." Task Force on Iranian Proliferation, Regional Security, and US Policy, *Preventing a Cascade of Instability. U.S. Engagement to Check Iranian Nuclear Progress*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2009, 3.

7. "We want Iran to calculate what I think is a fair assessment, that if the US extends a defense umbrella to the region, if we do even more support to support the military capacity of those in the Gulf, it's unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer, because they won't be able to intimidate or dominate, as they apparently believe they can, once they have a nuclear weapon." Quoted in Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "Clinton Speaks of Shielding Mideast From Iran," *The New-York Times*, 23 July 2009.

8. Egyptian President Mubarak referred to a "nuclear umbrella" in his reaction to Mrs. Clinton's statement. See his interview in Al-Ahram quoted in Fareed Mahdy, "Disarmament: Egypt Rejects US Nuclear Umbrella," *Inter Press Service Agency*, 27 August 2009.

9. One way to solve this problem is to give threat-specific assurances: for instance, some of the security guarantees given by Washington during the Cold war were explicitly limited to cases of "Communist aggression."

10. See 2008 Annual Arab Opinion Poll, Zogby International, March 2008. 73% of Saudis consider that an Iranian bomb would have "positive" consequences for the Middle East.

11. Peter N. Madson, "The Sky is Not Falling: Regional Reaction to a Nuclear-Armed Iran," Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Mars 2006, 55.

12. Quoted in Fareed Mahdy, "Disarmament: Egypt Rejects US Nuclear Umbrella," *Inter Press Service Agency*, 27 August 2009.

13. See for instance *Task Force on Iranian Proliferation, Regional Security, and U.S. Policy*, op. cit., 6.

14. Quoted in Kenyon, op. cit.

15. Emile Hokayem, "Memo to Mr Obama: Gulf security and why it matters," *The National*, 25 February 2009.

16. Emile Hokayem, "Hillary's grand idea on Iran may not serve the Gulf," *The National*, 28 July 2009.

17. One could add that a potential drawback of stronger security guarantees to Gulf countries is that they could perhaps influence the way some governments behave vis-à-vis their Shi'a populations. At issue is the following hypothesis: if a Shi'a revolt erupted somewhere in the peninsula, could not a government be tempted to repress it more forcefully than it would have if no protection against Iran had been provided by the United States?

18. Quoted in Peter Kenyon, "Gulf States Stuck Between US, Iran on Nuclear Issue," *National Public Radio*, 27 August 2009.

19. There might be some merit in having Pakistan play a more explicit role in the protection of Saudi Arabia – assuming that Islamabad remains an ally of the West.

20. European Commission, *Statistical Pocketbook 2009*, 31 (data from 2006).

21. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Embassy in Kuwait, *Historique et présentation des relations franco-koweïtiennes*. It was announced by Sarkozy that the agreement is to be revised like the one with the UAE has been (Nicolas Sarkozy, Conférence de presse du président de la République française, 11 February 2009).

22. René André, *Rapport fait au nom de la Commission des affaires étrangères sur le projet de loi, adopté par le Sénat, autorisant l'approbation de l'accord entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement de l'Etat du Qatar sur l'encouragement et la protection réciproques des investissements*, National Assembly, 16 June 1999, 7.

23. Nicolas Sarkozy, *Allocution de M. le Président de la République à l'occasion de l'inauguration de la base interarmées française*, Abou Dabi, 26 May 2009.

24. The base will host about 500 military personnel. The term “base” is actually a misnomer: a more accurate description would be a set of three military facilities for air (Al-Dahfra), maritime (Fujairah), and land forces.

25. This agreement is to be made public, since the new French defense policy adopted in June 2008 makes it mandatory to inform the Parliament of any new bilateral defense agreement.

26. Quoted in Natalie Nougayrède, “La France s’installe militairement dans le Golfe,” *Le Monde*, 26 May 2008.

27. See Nougayrède, *op. cit.*

28. Ministry of Defense, *Point de presse*, 18 June 2009. It is possible to imagine such circumstances. For instance, in a hypothetical future scenario, if Iran attempted to blackmail Paris to avoid a French military action in the Gulf (or force them to withdraw), by publicly “reminding” the French existence of missiles that could reach their territory. (At the time of the 1991 Gulf war, France had ruled out any nuclear weapons use. But Iraq did not have the means to reach European territory.) There is no evidence that the French air base in Abu Dhabi could host nuclear-armed aircraft. But the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier is nuclear-certified and its aircraft can be equipped with nuclear cruise missiles.

29. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Country Profile: UAE*, 12 January 2009.

30. UK House of Commons, *Commons Hansard, Westminster Hall Debates*, 9 June 2009.

31. It is not to be noted here that London and Paris sold the United Arab Emirates one of their finest weapons systems, the “Black Shaheen” cruise missile, developed by the MBDA firm for the UK (“Storm Shadow”) and French (“Scalp-EG”) armed forces.

32. The NATO security guarantee (Article 5 of the Washington Treaty) is valid only for aggressions in the Euro-Atlantic area. This is not to say that NATO could not have a role in a post-conflict environment.