



## Requirements for Deterrence: Two Challenging Scenarios

### Strategic Insights, Volume VIII, Issue 4 (September 2009)

by [Elbridge A. Colby](#)

[Strategic Insights](#) is a quarterly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Two clearly undesirable but plausible scenarios merit serious consideration by the Alliance. The first is: What should and can the Alliance do if efforts to prevent Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons fail? Specifically, how can the Alliance contribute to developing and supporting a deterrent structure designed to minimize the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran?

The second: The United States, most recently in a speech by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in October 2008, has announced an “expanded deterrence” policy against terrorism conducted with weapons of mass destruction (WMD).[1] How does this policy interact with U.S. commitments under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty? Should the Alliance as a whole adopt a similar policy? If so, how could an integrated policy be operationalized? If not, how could the other Alliance members work with the U.S. policy?

With respect to the nuclear-armed Iran scenario, it should be emphasized that it is the policy of the United States, Canada, and the European Alliance members that Iran be dissuaded from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, and it is of course sincerely to be hoped that these efforts bear fruit. But it is surely wise to consider the not implausible scenario that, despite these and other nations’ efforts, Iran may succeed in developing and deploying nuclear weapons. The dangers such an eventuality would present include proliferation in the region and worldwide through the weakening of the global nonproliferation structure; instability due to regional rivalries and perilously postured nuclear forces, possibly leading to disruptions to energy and economic flows; and, of course, the heightened possibility of nuclear use. Clearly, an Iranian bomb would pose serious challenges to the Alliance’s interests. It may therefore be taken as a given in this scenario that NATO would want to take steps to minimize the negative consequences of such an eventuality. This paper considers how it could do so at reasonable cost and in light of existing political realities.

The United States could lead the development of a deterrent structure in the Middle East region that would assure its allies and partners, deter Iranian use of nuclear weapons, negate the significant advantages accruing to Tehran from the acquisition of nuclear arms, and obviate the need among countries in the region for follow-on proliferation. The strategy would seek to show to Iran and to the region that Tehran would not gain any significant benefits from acquiring nuclear weapons—excepting only protection from violent regime change by external powers and prestige—while also making clear that Iran would be held to a high standard of liability not only for the use of nuclear arms but also for the transfer of nuclear weapons or technology and for negligence or loss.

To form a “deterrent structure” the United States and other interested parties would work to build a politico-strategic association or structure in the Middle East to defend key states and interests, such as the free flow of oil, by deterring and, if necessary, defending against Iranian aggression. While such a structure would need to be flexible and responsive, reflecting the interests of the involved countries rather than being imposed on the region, a few steps would almost certainly be involved. For instance, the United States should consider reaffirming and strengthening its commitments to the defense of the key Gulf states tracing back from President Roosevelt’s meeting with Ibn Saud through the Carter Doctrine and Desert Shield to today’s Gulf Security Dialogue. While the United States and countries in the region have historically been uncomfortable with formal security guarantees, a strong reaffirmation of U.S. commitments to prevent dominance of the Gulf by a hostile power could be useful, especially if delivered by the President.

In terms of declaratory policy, the United States could reiterate through a variety of media, directly and indirectly, that it is prepared to respond overwhelmingly and potentially in kind to Iranian nuclear employment against key states and interests and that American retaliation would be indisputably devastating to Iran and whatever objectives it was trying to pursue. At the political level, this could take the form of statements by senior U.S. officials, including the President, the Secretary of Defense, and military commanders. The potentially damaging political consequences from such statements would be alleviated by the fact that Iranian nuclear weapons acquisition, in violation of the NPT, would render irrelevant the U.S. negative security assurances issued in connection with the Treaty.<sup>[2]</sup>

Militarily, the United States and other interested parties could productively deploy nuclear-capable, missile defense, and conventional strike forces to the region, especially on maritime and aerial platforms. For instance, the United States might look into the deliberately noticeable deployment of U.S. nuclear forces into the region, including through strategic bomber flights, dual-capable aircraft, and/or the re-installment of nuclear weapons aboard U.S. surface vessels and attack submarines (though obviously this would have arms control ramifications).<sup>[3]</sup> The United States and other interested parties could also deploy additional conventional forces, such as strike aircraft and naval forces armed with cruise missiles, which could be used in retaliatory strikes against Iran as well as for direct defense of vital interests. Air and missile defenses would also play a vital role. By degrading the probability of success of Iranian strikes, theater air and missile defenses would weaken Iran’s confidence in its own capabilities, assure allies, protect U.S. and partner forces, and constitute a demonstration of U.S. and partner resolve. Defenses against intercontinental missile threats could also help defeat Iranian attempts to threaten North America or Europe and alleviate classic de-coupling concerns among regional partners. Finally, the United States and other interested parties could establish or strengthen relationships with states in the region designed to build up internal security capabilities, share intelligence, and improve state capacity with the goal of blunting the threat of Iranian subversion. This would be particularly important in order to minimize Iran’s advantages from its nuclear capability at lower levels of escalation. The Gulf Security Dialogue and existing relationships with key Arab states such as Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia already offer firm platforms for such an effort. Regarding Iranian covert use, transfer, or negligence, the United States should also consider specifically focusing the doctrine of expanded liability for WMD use announced by Secretary Gates on Iran, thereby putting Tehran on notice about the perils of possessing nuclear weapons. This could be done privately or publicly, directly or indirectly, or some combination thereof.

Most of the focus here has been on U.S. efforts, but much of the challenge in developing and sustaining a deterrent structure against a nuclear-armed Iran would actually be political, and it is here that NATO could probably make a great contribution. To repeat: the purpose of the structure would be to negate significant Iranian advantages from acquiring nuclear weapons, deter Iranian use of nuclear weapons, and convince other countries in the region not to pursue nuclear weapons of their own—and much of the effectiveness of these aims would be aided by countries believing that the United States and other external powers would actually live up to their

commitments, including military and other coercive action. This would require addressing the perennial credibility problem. Clear evidence of broad international political support for a difficult posture would make that posture much more credible and workable. In practical terms, NATO nations could contribute to the credibility of a deterrent structure in the Middle East by openly endorsing it through, for instance, a North Atlantic Council communiqué and by affirming that they would severely condemn—and cooperate in responding to—nuclear use or coercion by Iran; by providing logistical support, basing and overflight permissions, and funding for activities related to the structure, including capacity-building and training; by urging key states in the region not to pursue nuclear programs of their own in response to Iran's; by maintaining public diplomacy and political pressure against Iran as an NPT violator through the UN, IAEA, and other fora; and, of course, by directly contributing military forces, even relatively modest ones, to the posture. In addition to serving the objectives of preserving stability and discouraging proliferation in an area of key Alliance concern, such involvement would also not unduly tax the Alliance's resources. Because the Alliance's role would be largely political, much of the work would be diplomatic and therefore relatively inexpensive. Further, even for the United States and other Alliance members wishing to become involved militarily, some of the forces most suited for the deterrent, defensive, and retaliatory functions required would be precisely those aerial and maritime forces least exercised in the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan. That said, such an effort would require significant investment in certain kinds of capabilities, especially missile defenses and strike capabilities, and considerable flexibility in working to assure key countries, especially Israel.

Broadly, the Alliance should identify ways in which it could contribute to deterring a nuclear-armed Iran from destabilizing a vital region and preventing proliferation both in the Middle East and globally. These are viable goals and within the economic resources and political constraints of the Alliance members. Dealing with a nuclear-armed Iran would principally be a question of will and commitment to an appropriate deterrence posture. NATO could play a critical role in supporting this effort.

The second plausible scenario examined in this paper concerns how NATO should respond to the new U.S. deterrence policy against WMD terrorism. Catastrophic terrorism, while not necessarily a high probability event in the near term, is nonetheless a real and potentially calamitous threat. As destructive power and technology spread outwards to more marginal entities and downwards to smaller groups, the possibility of a grave attack is too plausible to dismiss and must, therefore, be planned for. The United States has taken a critically important step in this direction by making clear that it has expanded its deterrent posture against WMD terrorism. It has done so by pledging to hold not only those directly involved accountable, but also those state or non-state entities or individuals that support or enable such an attack. As Secretary Gates stated in his October 2008 speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "[T]he United States will hold any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor or individual fully accountable for supporting or enabling terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction whether by facilitating, financing, or providing expertise or safe haven for such efforts." This shift in deterrence policy is important because it means that the United States is prepared to take far more expansive retaliatory action in the wake of an attack than would be contemplated under a narrower understanding of liability. The United States has thus made any involvement—even seemingly marginal—in a WMD strike extremely perilous, and this may deter adversaries from carrying out such attacks.

Nothing similar has been promulgated by NATO, though statements in 2006 by Prime Minister Blair and President Chirac offer parallels among individual NATO nations.<sup>[4]</sup> This leaves a worrying gap in doctrine between the United States and most of its NATO partners and raises a host of questions that should be worked out before such an attack occurs. For instance, would and should catastrophic attacks on non-U.S. NATO members be addressed in the same manner as Secretary Gates described, or would retaliation take a more limited form, or should this be left ambiguous? In both the Gates speech and Stephen Hadley's initial announcement of the policy in a February 2008 speech at Stanford University, the question of the expanded deterrence policy's

applicability to allies was left unaddressed. The NATO allies should adopt a similar policy, or at the very least reach an understanding about what would be expected should a NATO member suffer such an attack.

An even more troubling scenario might be posited: What if an attack occurred against the United States or another NATO country by a group operating from another NATO country (of course, without that country's approval)? What kinds of actions, standards, and processes would this expanded deterrence policy require of NATO governments in response to such an attack? What would be expected of NATO members both in advance of (and in the wake of) WMD terrorist attacks in terms of security, legal, compensatory, military, and other efforts? It seems clear that NATO should be prepared as an alliance to deal intelligently and rationally with these questions in advance of such an attack, rather than in the heat, confusion, and rancor of its aftermath.

Addressing these questions is a simple necessity in light of the imperfectly aligned doctrines among NATO partners. The Alliance can be a beneficiary of and a participant in the policy rather than merely adapting to the new doctrine articulated by the United States, and so should actually adopt such a policy as an Alliance. Properly formulated, such a common policy would benefit all members by bringing the weight of the Alliance behind an expanded deterrent posture that would be strengthened by being issued and endorsed by many countries, since such a posture is more likely to be seen as credible if backed by many nations. Non-U.S. Alliance members would benefit from the advantages of a collective posture likely to increase substantially the effectiveness of deterrence against WMD terrorism. The United States and all members would benefit from the collective strength and legitimacy that multiple allies would supply for a policy that relies on credibility, legitimacy, capability, and reach for its effectiveness. The policy would also help countries to meet their international legal obligations to combat WMD proliferation and use under UN Security Council Resolutions 1373 and 1540 and the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism, among other authorities. Of course, it should be emphasized that any NATO policy would not supplant nor place veto restrictions on U.S. or any national policy; rather, it would supplement national policies.

Yet neither simple doctrinal consistency nor collective endorsement of an expanded deterrence posture can emerge from inertia. Because it is a difficult, demanding, and complicated policy in either unilateral or multilateral manifestations, digesting and integrating the policy will require serious deliberation among the NATO allies. It therefore seems proper to launch a discussion on this proposed element of the response to the threat of catastrophic terrorism.

## About the Author

Elbridge Colby most recently served as an expert advisor to the Congressional Strategic Posture Commission. Previously he served in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, on the President's WMD Commission, and with the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Department of State. He has published articles in a variety of policy and news journals. The views expressed herein are the author's own and do not necessarily represent the views of any institution with which he is affiliated.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page. To have new issues of Strategic Insights delivered to your Inbox, please email [ccc@nps.edu](mailto:ccc@nps.edu) with subject line "Subscribe." There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

## References

1. Robert M. Gates, "[Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in the 21st Century](#)," speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 28 October 2008, 15; transcript available at [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/1028\\_transcrip\\_gates\\_checked.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/1028_transcrip_gates_checked.pdf)
2. Iran could, like North Korea, withdraw from the NPT and then declare a nuclear weapons capability and thus present itself as being at least in technical compliance with the Treaty. Of course, this would constitute a clear violation at the very least of the "spirit" of the Treaty and, according to many interpretations, its letter as well. For [text of the negative assurances](#) issued by the United States in 1995, see <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/npt/docs/940405-nsa.htm>.
3. President George H. W. Bush announced the removal of nuclear weapons from surface vessels and attack submarines in the Presidential Nuclear Initiative of 1991. These commitments, while matched by Russian/Soviet moves and significant arms control pillars, were not binding treaties and therefore could be revoked. Reinstallation of nuclear weapons aboard these vessels and submarines could, therefore, be matched by reductions or additional restraints in other areas. For [more information](#) on the Initiatives, see <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/pniglance>.
4. For the United Kingdom, see: <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/2318>. For France, see: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/19/AR2006011903311.html>.