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With the rise of Iran as a regional power, coupled with the opacity of its intent to develop nuclear weapons, other regional states could make the decision to weaponize their respective civil nuclear programs. As a leader of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, this potentiality presents a significant challenge to the United States and threatens its interests. Furthermore, the United States government has signaled a desire to decrease the reliance on military power in the region, choosing to focus on the other elements of national power as a means to solve security issues, to include non-proliferation.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**Revisiting U.S. Strategies of Counter-Proliferation:  
Military Power and Preventing the Spread of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**Major Nicholas B. Law, USMC**


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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Revisiting U.S. Strategies of Counter-Proliferation: Military Power and Preventing the Spread of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East

**Author:** Major Nicholas B. Law, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** Through refining military engagement and strengthening of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a viable security institution through the application of military power, the United States can dissuade allied potential proliferators that will ponder the notion of nuclear weapons development in coming years.

**Discussion:** Some Gulf states, who remain allied with the United States and who provide the regional security architecture that the U.S. depends in the Middle East, are currently developing civil nuclear power programs. With the rise of Iran as a regional power, coupled with the opacity of its intent to develop nuclear weapons, other regional states could make the decision to weaponize their respective civil nuclear programs. As a leader of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the United States has had experience in deterring non-allies, but a scenario, which could see significant allied countries choosing to develop nuclear weapons within the same region, would present a significant challenge to the United States and threaten its interests. Furthermore, the United States government has signaled a desire to decrease its reliance on military power in the region, choosing to focus on the other elements of national power as a means to solve security issues, to include non-proliferation efforts. The importance of military power cannot be overstated and should serve as a foundational element of national power to undergird non-proliferation efforts by the United States and among regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. A nuanced approach of military power application is required to achieve such ends.

**Conclusion:** The United States must apply military power through the Gulf Cooperation Council, encouraging increased cooperation on defense and security-related matters for member states. The reliance on legacy models of unilateral engagement will work to exacerbate the problems caused by nuclear weaponization enticement. Security Assistance programs, to include Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Financing, should be amended to develop a form of shared acquisition and development of high-end technologies, much like the stated goals of NATO's Smart Defense program. The United States must continue to encourage region-wide participation in military exercises that will develop capabilities of GCC states, encouraging cooperation and building confidence in its comprehensive ability to dissuade external aggression.

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The spread of nuclear weapons presents a major international security challenge in coming decades. Since the end of the Cold War and the relative stability it provided for the established nuclear order, new states have emerged as potential proliferators. Although the matter of nuclear proliferation was a second-tier issue under the relative stability of a bi-polar world divided between U.S. and Soviet spheres of influence, its dangers have reappeared with the increased threat of transnational terrorism and rising nation-states whose nuclear intent could upset a precarious balance between the established nuclear hierarchy and the international system.

Under this context, threats posed by nuclear proliferation have experienced a resurgence of public interest. In a 2009 speech in Prague shortly after taking office, President Obama called for a renewed commitment in preventing nuclear material and technology from falling into the hands of rogue states and/or non-state actors.<sup>1</sup> This declaration came roughly two years after George Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn published an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* highlighting the dangers of global nuclear weapons arsenals, a security regime based on these weapons, and the threats posed by potential proliferators.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps no region is more prone to the destabilizing effects of nuclear proliferation than the Middle East. Devoid of the established security institutions and agreements that have formed the bedrock of security throughout Europe and the Pacific over the past 60 years, the Middle East presents a unique challenge to the non-proliferation regime. The region is rife with political unrest, sustained challenges to recognized authority, and enormous energy reserves, making it a territory that is

important for global stability. Despite this importance, the region is too unstable for grand strategic vision, both for external or internal actors. The region is also home to states that have developed (or attempted to develop) a nuclear weapons capability. Although other regional states have either made or taken concrete steps to develop their own nuclear weapons arsenal, Israel is the only regional state that has allegedly developed an operational nuclear weapons capability.

As fears over potential proliferators in the region have escalated in recent years, concerns over a nuclear arms race throughout the Middle East have reenergized efforts of the wider international community to prevent what many would characterize as a disastrous precedent. Although these potential proliferators have the ability to upset the nuclear balance by challenging the exiting international order, these states do have a right to pursue peaceful nuclear programs as dictated by the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).<sup>3</sup> In fact, the rights to pursue a nuclear program for peaceful purposes are the justification that Iran has utilized as it has attempted to gain international support for its alleged peaceful nuclear program. Iranian desires to continue with the development of this capability has served as a primary driver for international engagement by those aligned to prevent Iran from illicitly pursuing a covert nuclear weapons program under the cover of peaceful proclamations. With the potential of a nuclear-armed Iran looming on the horizon, proliferation in the Middle East is a major concern. These shared anxieties were at the root of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in July 2015 between a U.S.-led group of nation-states (P5+1), the European Union, and The Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>4</sup>

As a leader in global non-proliferation efforts, with a vested interest in both the strength of the non-proliferation regime and the stability of the Middle East, the United States has historically focused its non-proliferation efforts on non-allies, such as Syria, Iraq, and Iran. However, the United States is currently confronted with the possibility of key regional allies acquiring a nuclear weapons capability in defiance of established international agreements and counter to U.S. interests in the region. With the possibility of Iran developing a nuclear weapons program capable of threatening the wider Middle East, other regional states have signaled that they may attempt to keep pace. Some of these states-Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates- have refocused efforts on developing peaceful nuclear power programs that could transition into producing weapons-grade nuclear material. All three are allied with the United States and provide the framework upon which U.S. foreign policy in the region is built.

Under this new reality, the United States must craft a new policy to engage with regional allies in order to not only maintain influence in the region, but also to dissuade these states from weaponizing their respective programs. Furthermore, U.S. policies on countering the spread of nuclear weapons and its simultaneous requirement for access and influence in the region calls for an enduring demand on strategic focus and resources. Through refining military engagement and strengthening of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a viable security institution through the application of military power, the United States can dissuade allied potential proliferators that will ponder the notion of nuclear weapons development in coming years.

This paper will begin with an assessment of three key U.S. allies in the Middle East and the trend of a declining U.S. military presence. The second section will address

the drivers of potential nuclear proliferation through both a theoretical and historical approach. The third section will discuss the dangers that a decreased U.S. military presence could pose to potential allied proliferators and its effect on the drivers of proliferation. This section will also address the unique role played by military power in counter-proliferation efforts. Finally, this paper will conclude with three recommendations that use military power to address these drivers of proliferation through a nuanced approach of engagement with the existing regional security regime.

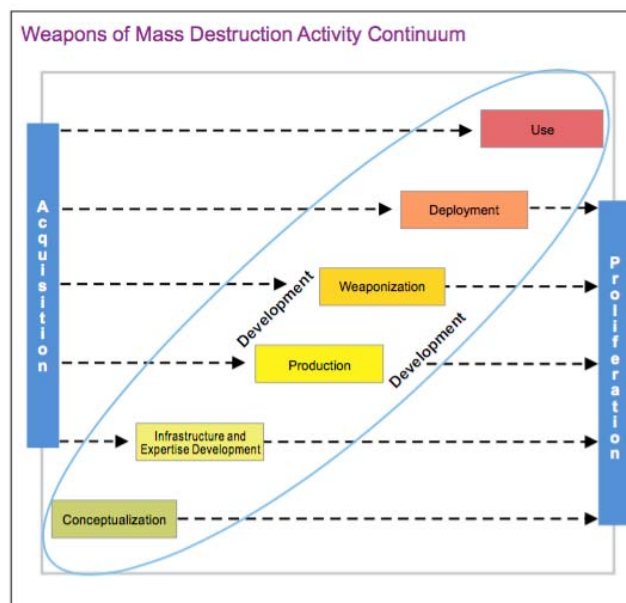
## TRUTHS AND CONSEQUENCES

In December 2006, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) announced a joint initiative to study the feasibility of establishing peaceful nuclear energy programs.<sup>5</sup> Following this initiative, several GCC states signed agreements with foreign countries in a partnership to obtain expertise in constructing viable civilian nuclear programs. The United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) signed an agreement with South Korea in 2009 to build four commercial nuclear power reactors by 2020, the first of which is scheduled to come online in 2017.<sup>6</sup> This agreement came on the heels of the U.S./U.A.E. nuclear cooperation agreement (123 Agreement) earlier in the year, increasing cooperation on civil nuclear energy development.<sup>7</sup> Saudi Arabia also has plans to construct 16 nuclear energy reactors over the next 20 years at a cost of more than \$80 billion.<sup>8</sup> In 2009, Kuwait signed an agreement with France for assistance in developing a civilian nuclear power program as well.<sup>9</sup> Although Kuwait temporarily suspended its planning for moving forward in developing a civil nuclear power capability in 2012 after the

Fukushima disaster, it is possible that Kuwait could decide to restart progress on the nuclear issue should other regional states demonstrate success.<sup>10</sup>

Although these U.S. allies stated their peaceful intent and agree to remain in compliance with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regulations, the presence of nuclear facilities certainly places those states much closer to developing weapons-grade material than a state that has no such program. According to the Weapons of Mass Destruction Activity Continuum presented in Joint Publication 3-40 (Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction), the process of developing a nuclear weapons program consists of six steps. (Figure 1 highlights this continuum).<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 1: Weapons of Mass Destruction Activity Continuum<sup>12</sup>**



In order to transition a civil nuclear facility to a weapons facility requires two components: the ability to enrich uranium and available stockpiles of material (both raw and enriched material).<sup>13</sup> Although the inputs required to transition from Production (Step 3) to Weaponization (Step 4) are significant, it would be this decision that could represent a “point of no return” with regard to a region-wide arms race if other competing

states believe that this threshold is approaching or already surpassed. As a point of clarity, the decision by one state in the region to develop a nuclear capability would likely cause other states to make the decision to weaponize in order to keep pace with other regional states. A failure to do so could leave those states that fall behind vulnerable as other states gain this capability. The drivers of the decision to weaponize will be explained more fully in the next section.

Combined with this concern is the United States' concurrent reduction of military assets and forces in the region, signaling an overall reduction in the reliance on military power to address many of the complex security issues that continue to plague the region. The highly publicized "pivot to Asia" signals to Middle Eastern states that the regional issues that dominated the first decade of the 21st century have potentially become less important than those issues surrounding security in the Pacific Basin and across the Far East. These signals could leave Middle Eastern allies recalibrating their respective futures as it relates to their own security and national defense.

Furthermore, as they "right size" the U.S. military presence in the region after more than a decade of war, national leaders have expressed a desire to deemphasize the application of military power in the Middle East altogether.<sup>14</sup> In his address from the White House at the height of the Arab Spring in May 2011, President Obama indicated that the policies of the United States relating to the Middle East would reduce its reliance on military power and increase its use of other components of national power (diplomatic, informational, and economic) to help solve the complex issues affecting the region.<sup>15</sup> Although President Obama indicated that preventing the spread of nuclear weapons in the region remained a core interest to the United States, he spoke generally of

amended policies that sought to rely more heavily on non-military solutions, stating the following:

We must acknowledge that a strategy based solely upon the narrow pursuit of these interests will not fill an empty stomach or allow someone to speak their mind. Moreover, failure to speak to the broader aspirations of ordinary people will only feed the suspicion that has festered for years that the United States pursues our interests at their expense. Given that this mistrust runs both ways — as Americans have been seared by hostage-taking and violent rhetoric and terrorist attacks that have killed thousands of our citizens — a failure to change our approach threatens a deepening spiral of division between the United States and the Arab world.<sup>16</sup>

Based on this logic, the Obama administration argued that its decision to pursue a diplomatic solution, as embodied by the JCPOA with Iran, was the best solution to dissuade Iran's potential aims at developing a nuclear weapons capability. Although the use of military force remains a viable option should Iran fail to fulfill its commitments based on the JCPOA, the existing paradigm of military force serves as a means of enforcement against states that exceed, or seriously threaten to exceed, international law related to nuclear weapons proliferation. However, the pursuit of agreements with states like Iran that are not aligned with the United States clearly defines the role of U.S. military forces in helping to deter violations of international agreements under the fear of intervention. What remains unclear is how the U.S. military is positioned to dissuade allies; those states with which the U.S. has determined to have mutual security interests, from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Under the potentialities of dissuading nuclear proliferation among regional allies, as well as the desire to reduce the reliance on military power to solve such complex issues, the United States will be required to craft a policy that satisfies both constraints. This policy will need to address how the U.S. can deter nuclear proliferation efforts of

three of its key regional allies-Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. To do so, a new vision is required; one that acknowledges both political will and military necessity, while simultaneously crafting a role for the application of military power that the other elements of national power simply cannot fulfill, either individually or cumulatively. Furthermore, a role for U.S. military power must be identified as a proactive measure vice simply an enforcement mechanism to punish after a state has acquired nuclear weapons technologies or in response to a violation of international law.

#### DRIVERS OF POTENTIAL PROLIFERATION AMONG REGIONAL ALLIES

Since the dawn of the nuclear age and its related application to weapons design, states have sought this capability. As the first state to successfully develop, test, and use a nuclear device in 1945, the United States gained an important and strategic advantage vis-à-vis other states. This early lead in nuclear capability ensured that the United States would play a vital role in shaping the post-World War II order. The Soviet Union trailed the United States in testing their first atomic bomb in 1949, followed by the United Kingdom (1952), France (1960), and China (1964).<sup>17</sup> These Nuclear Weapons States (NWS), as signatories to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), would work to strengthen the non-proliferation regime through the implementation of safeguards and under international oversight.<sup>18</sup>

The nuclear non-proliferation regime established by the NPT has produced mixed effects. During the Cold War, it is widely believed that three states-Pakistan, India, and Israel-acquired nuclear weapons in defiance of international sensibilities. Although these three states have remained non-signatories to the treaty, their acquisition of nuclear

technologies could encourage potential proliferators in the Middle East if the cost of subverting the NPT remains low. Conversely, while these previous instances of nuclear program development were unnerving to the international community, these states did refrain from employing these weapons despite instances where their vital security interests were challenged.

Furthermore, desires to start a peaceful nuclear energy program do not guarantee that a particular state will ultimately pursue initiatives that would result in weapons development. There are certainly many states that have the capability to weaponize their existing nuclear energy programs, but simply choose not to do so. Other states, such as South Korea, Argentina, South Africa, and Brazil, abandoned their nuclear weapons programs. In South Africa's case, it is believed that it actually secretly developed and tested several nuclear devices before abandoning the program, choosing to join the NPT in 1991.<sup>19</sup>

For the states of the GCC, specifically Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., and potentially Kuwait, the decision to pursue a nuclear energy program may be less about developing a weapon and more about diversification of energy sources to satisfy exploding requirements and demands. The rise in energy consumption in recent years for these states have created burdens on domestic energy reserves, especially crude oil and natural gas, which remain the chief export of these countries. Under these circumstances, the decision to pursue a nuclear energy program could be a means to achieving a long-term solution to these increasing demands.<sup>20</sup> Although this logic is reasonable, the tenets of the security dilemma, the socio-political characteristics of the wider Middle East, and the

enduring instability of the region suggest that fears and mistrust of the actions of other states could result in a decision to weaponize.

It is important to understand why states seek nuclear weapons, despite the decreased utility of their use and in the face of international norms and taboos against these weapons. Analyzing these root causes is essential for crafting a role for the application of military power for counter-proliferation purposes. Although restraint by previous proliferators could reduce fears about other states acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, risks remain too high for global stability to wager on similar restraint among Middle Eastern states.

As Scott Sagan explains, three basic reasons can explain why states pursue nuclear weapons. The first is represented by the Security Model, which is most easily explained based on the perceived threats posed by other states. Sagan explains that in the case of proliferation, the emergence of an existential threat (nuclear or conventional) in a particular region will cause other regional states to pursue their own weapon in order to maintain its own national security, and a failure to do so could lead to immitigable circumstances. This model can certainly be useful in explaining the Russia-China-India succession of nuclear weapons development from the late-1940s to the mid-1970s.<sup>21</sup>

For the three Gulf States analyzed here, incursions on national sovereignty and external threats have been common over the past 30 years. Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, requiring the mass mobilization of a U.S.-led coalition to drive those hostile forces out of the country and to restore the Kuwaiti government. During the same conflict, Iraq fired SCUD missiles into Saudi Arabia, and threatened incursion into Saudi territory as well. Although U.A.E.'s geographic location provides it some level of insulation from threats

beyond the Sultanates that line the Persian Gulf, its small population and relatedly small military troop strength make it vulnerable. Overlaid atop the perceived threats from inner-Arab rivalries is the presence of Iran, which carries with it the ancient tensions between Sunni-Shia sects of Islam and the Arab/Persian ethnic divide. Iran's efforts to influence Shia populations in states across the region, like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, and Lebanon, reinforces the fears that regional states have toward Iranian intentions.

Under this perception of vulnerability, these Gulf States have sought to underwrite their own security with unilateral military capabilities, usually acquired through Security Assistance (SA) programs with the West. In addition, these states have also sought alignment with the United States as an additional guarantor of their security. For all three states, this relationship with the United States has been enduring, consistent, and meaningful. In light of this patronage, mistrust and fears over ceding national security to other states or regional institutions can be witnessed in the relative underdevelopment of the GCC as a viable security cooperation institution despite its existence for almost 40 years. Founded in 1981 as a response to increased aggression by both Iraq and Iran, the GCC has failed to develop a credible deterrent to potential antagonism by outsiders due to a lack of support from member states.

Sagan's second model, the Domestic Politics Model, suggests that the pursuit and acquisition of nuclear weapons could be a by-product of a particular scientific-military-industrial complex or internal bureaucracy that is inclined to influence national leadership through a bottom-up approach.<sup>22</sup> Under pressure to satisfy the military establishment, centers of research and high technology, or other local politicians and power brokers,

state governments may pursue nuclear weapons to placate these groups or to quell domestic unrest. In the case of India, the detonation of the Chinese atomic weapon in 1964 did not produce a consensus within the Indian government on acquiring its own weapons capability. Some in government wanted to disavow the pursuit of nuclear weapons and instead search for nuclear guarantees from established nuclear powers, such as the United States or Soviet Union. Others, however, believed that an Indian nuclear program was the best option for ensuring its own interests despite the high costs and uncertainty of doing so. Under pressure from pro-nuclear coalitions within the government and the military-scientific industrial complex, as well as growing unrest within the Indian population, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made the decision to proceed with a weapons program. Whether it was internal pressure within her own government, or growing domestic unrest, Gandhi saw the decision to pursue a nuclear capability as a way to shore up public support.<sup>23</sup>

For Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the U.A.E., the relationship with the military establishment and the wider population can be tenuous. All three have large oil reserves and sovereign wealth, making it possible for their respective governments to fund state budgets without requiring taxation of its citizens, thus creating a detachment of these citizens to their national leaders. This detachment results in a political structure that may be less inclined to be responsive to grievances of their constituencies, which can contribute to social unrest.

Of the three states analyzed here, Saudi Arabia is most prone to experiencing the domestic pressure that could drive nuclear weaponization should Iran develop the capability. The ruling family, the Al-Saud, have historically maintained a tenuous grip

on authority. On-going tension between the ruling family and the religious clergy on modernization and social reforms have created some sense of uneasiness, exposing the continued friction among the monarchy, the clergy, and Islamic traditionalists.<sup>24</sup> Kuwait and U.A.E. have not experienced the same challenges to established authority on the same level as Saudi Arabia, however both states have witnessed some popular movements that have forced their governments to acknowledge these challenges. More concerning is the fact that all three states view domestic unrest within their respective countries as a product of external influence. Saudi Arabia routinely accuses Iran of inflaming Shia groups within its Eastern Province, while both Kuwait and U.A.E. accuse the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood of doing the same among their Sunni subjects.<sup>25</sup> Whether these pressures alone are enough to drive the weaponization of a civil nuclear program is unclear. However, continued or worsening domestic conditions, especially in light of falling oil prices upon which these countries so heavily depend, could play a much larger role in coming years.

Within the Domestic Politics Model, the role of the military-scientific industrial complex can drive decisions to proliferate, as seen in the India example. Of course, the presence of such centers of high technology does not guarantee the same outcome as the Indian example; however, the policies of all three Middle Eastern states discussed here have made such research a priority. Saudi Arabia has attempted to solidify its leadership role in the high-technology sector, to include nuclear technology development and scientific research. It has attempted to be a regional pioneer in this sector with the creation of the King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), within which resides the National Center for Nuclear Technology.<sup>26</sup> The United Arab Emirates,

in cooperation with the United States Departments of Energy and State under Agreement 123, has established the Gulf Nuclear Energy Infrastructure Institute (GNEII) at Khalifa University, which is designed to educate a growing cadre of nuclear energy professionals and build the required expertise to maintain its future nuclear energy program.<sup>27</sup>

Although it has suspended its nuclear efforts, Kuwait has still maintained a nuclear research capability through the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research. Officially, there is no evidence of such research centers being linked to weapons development or each military establishment, but such lack of evidence should not be proof that cooperation could not occur in the future.

Finally, the Norms Model asserts that states will seek nuclear weapons for symbolic purposes, as a sign of prestige, and a tangible example that is required for international recognition as a top-tier, modern state.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the military utility of these weapons, the nuclear symbolism represents its own end. Sagan cites the French decision to proliferate in the early-1950s as an example of a state seeking international recognition and as an assurance of continued legitimacy within the world. France suffered terribly during World War II, emerging as a shell of its former self. Although on the side of the winning coalition, France did not have the military capability and international standing that it did before the war. It is possible that the decision to proliferate was therefore aimed at ensuring France's independence and importance within the new order.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, the fact that all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council are nuclear-weapons states adds another perspective that can inform desires for nuclear weapons proliferation. As Hedley Bull surmised, the relative stability

of the nuclear-weapons states during the Cold War did not translate to stability for the rest of the world dealing with regional friction.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the high-level discussions on nuclear arms control only reaffirmed the perceived hierarchical position of lesser states. Furthermore, this creation of the “haves” and “have-nots” and the failure of the “haves” to eliminate their nuclear stockpiles as called for by the NPT works to reaffirm animosities between those distinct groups, and works to legitimize the weapon.<sup>31</sup> As it remains, the more the international community tries to keep nuclear weapons from other states, the more they may want them. As the United States works with its international partners to dissuade Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, this could work to reinforce the legitimacy of the weapon region-wide.

The prestige of nuclear weapons could certainly have an effect on U.S. allies in the Middle East. Prestige plays a large role in Arab culture, with nuclear weapons potentially playing a role in the on-going game of “one-upsmanship” between Gulf States. As a useful generalization, “Arab culture and high prestige correlate on every status scale.”<sup>32</sup> This competition, even among friends, can be seen in the fields of architecture, science, and military hardware. Furthermore, the France example shows that states that fear a decreased position in the international order may take steps to ensure such erosion. It is no secret that the West is attempting to reduce its dependence on Middle Eastern oil. These attempts, coupled with consistently low oil prices, could generate similar questions of prestige and international standing for Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the U.A.E. as important players.

Of the drivers of potential proliferation identified by Sagan’s three models, U.S. military power is best positioned to address the drivers identified by the Security Model

and the Norms Model. Military power would be challenged to address the Domestic Politics Model; however, it could serve as a compliment to other forms of national power if required. To address the drivers within the Security Model, it is necessary for the United States to reduce mistrust and uncertainty among its regional allies. Iranian development of a nuclear weapon could cause region-wide proliferation, but so could the development of a weapon by an ally. Misinformation and misinterpreted signals among these allied states must be addressed. Secondly, U.S. military power can address the drivers of proliferation found in the Norms Model by working to deemphasize the importance of nuclear weapons as a symbol of international or regional recognition. Doing so will require a methodology that amends the way in which regional states view U.S. military hardware and the unilateral acquisition of such material.

#### DECLINING PRESENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON DRIVERS OF PROLIFERATION

In the Middle East, the tenets Sagan and Bull espouse are likely to hold true. Proliferation in the Middle East is possible because of an overall lack of trustworthiness among regional states. The presence of external actors wielding considerable influence has empowered certain states, while others have been left to ensure their national security based upon self-help alone. For the United States, its policies have resulted in significant engagement with almost all of the states of the Middle East, but varying levels of engagement have reinforced the notion of self-help among those that feel that relationships with key external allies could be shaky or imbalanced. Under the conditions of a reduced presence for the United States in the region, perceived favoritism by the United States could exacerbate the problem.

As mentioned previously, there exists a strong political desire in the U.S. to reduce its reliance on military power in the Middle East. In the absence of crisis requiring the deployment of large numbers of conventional military forces, the United States is likely to decrease its footprint in the region to pre-9/11 levels. Although current operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) create some level of uncertainty on the long-term commitment of U.S. military power in the region, it is very likely that troop strength will not approach the levels seen during the height of the Iraq War. Stated political desires of national leaders are not the only drivers of a reduced footprint. This theme has also built considerable support in the national media and corresponds to a growing sentiment throughout the general public. As described by *The National Interest*, “More U.S. forces are not needed, even given the current crisis. The United States was right to draw down forces in the region, and it can continue to secure its key objectives with a small military footprint. When it comes to the Middle East, less is more.”<sup>33</sup> While these sentiments are compelling, it is necessary that the United States maintain a robust level of engagement with these states in order to ensure continued access, promote wider regional stability, and dissuade nuclear proliferation.

As an indication of the need to maintain this access, the United States has solidified its “smaller footprint” within these states. The United States has continued its small presence in Saudi Arabia with its United States Military Training Mission (USMTM). It has also expanded its presence in Kuwait and U.A.E, with the forward regional headquarters of the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, respectively. These elements, although important for demonstrating commitment to regional allies, provide little, if any, actual war fighting capability. Instead, the presence of U.S. forces, no

matter how small, is calculated to be enough to dissuade external aggression and/or to provide the adequate confidence for regional states on continued levels of U.S. commitment.

However, fostering these relationships, no matter how old or strong, may not be enough to prevent these states from pursuing their own nuclear capability. Under the context of a reduction in U.S. presence, allies may still feel the need to pursue a nuclear weapons capability regardless of the level of engagement by the United States. As explained by Monteiro and Debs, states that have a strong nuclear ally, such as the United States, could pursue a nuclear capability under a security paradigm if those states believe that their nuclear ally may not be committed to future protection. They explain:

Not all states with powerful allies proliferate, however. Should a protégé expect its ally to remain a reliable guarantor of its security, it would lack the willingness to acquire the bomb. Conversely, should it expect that pursuing nuclear weapons would result in abandonment by its ally prior to acquiring the bomb, it might be exposed to a preventive strike and not have the opportunity to nuclearize. Therefore, a weak state is likely to acquire nuclear weapons only when it possesses a powerful ally that is neither willing to offer reliable future protection guarantees nor able to issue consequential threats of immediate abandonment.<sup>34</sup>

In the context of the reduction of U.S. forces in the Middle East, this potentiality is troubling.

The importance of military power in addressing the challenges posed by nuclear proliferation is addressed by U.S. national planning documents. Successive iterations of the National Security Strategy (NSS) under the current administration have highlighted the importance of the counter-proliferation mission. The most recent NSS states that the United States considers the prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons to be a core interest of the United States.<sup>35</sup> This sentiment follows the 2010 NSS, which also speaks

to the dangers posed, specifically, by the threat of nuclear proliferation within the Middle East and to the overarching policy that the United States seeks to pursue, such as strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and working to secure threatened nuclear weapons and material from terrorist groups.<sup>36</sup>

Derived from the 2010 NSS, the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) explicitly states that the United States will adopt a whole-of-government approach to countering proliferation and that the military will be utilized to “conduct a range of activities aimed at preventing the proliferation and use of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the 2012 DSG adds that this approach will seek to “frustrate the ambitions of nations bent on developing WMD, to include preventing Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability.”<sup>38</sup> These goals have also been restated by U.S. Army General Lloyd Austin, United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), in his Commander’s Posture Statement before the U.S. Congress in March 2015, in which he stated that the prevention of the proliferation of WMD remained a core national interest. Explicitly, General Austin stated that one of USCENTCOM core priorities remained to “prevent, and if required, counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; disrupt their development and prevent their use.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the importance placed on military power in preventing nuclear proliferation within these national planning documents, the proverbial military weight that the U.S. has wielded across the region as a whole will continue the downward trend. It is likely that U.S. military presence in the wider Middle East will return to a steady-state of approximately 26,000 troops, which matches pre-9/11 numbers across the wider CENTCOM AOR and appear to be congruent with stated political objectives.<sup>40</sup>

Compared with levels approaching 300,000 at the height of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)<sup>41</sup>, the United States is certainly faced with the need to do less with less. While fighting Islamic State militants in Iraq, Syria, and across the region, the U.S. will still need to reassure its allies that U.S. military force will be available to address external threats.

#### MILITARY POWER AS A MEANS TO ADDRESS DRIVERS OF PROLIFERATION

U.S. Counter-proliferation policy in the Middle East, specifically as it pertains to the potential proliferators of the Persian Gulf, will require the nuanced application of military power in order to prevent emerging proliferators from acquiring nuclear weapons. It would be naïve to suggest that U.S. military power would be sufficient to address all drivers of potential proliferation alone. However, an amended approach, coupled with the other elements of national power, could likely have very strong effects in dissuading U.S. allies in the region from developing nuclear weapons. The trend of deemphasizing military power could have the opposite effect.

This new look will not be solely based on maintaining the existing relationships between the United States and its regional allies. To be sure, the benefits derived from building partnership capacity, as well as the derivative goodwill that corresponds to the sharing of both high and low-end military technologies can go a long way toward addressing trust deficiencies, but current cooperation will not be enough to dissuade U.S. allies from developing nuclear weapons. Current approaches will only work to reinforce the status quo of self-help, the development of unilateral military capabilities, and the continued weakening of regional security institutions like the GCC.

The application of military power to prevent U.S. Middle East allies from developing nuclear weapons should rest on the following principles. First, military power is required to dissuade potential proliferators. Although traditionally conceived as a punishment mechanism for those that find themselves beyond the limits of international law, military power can and must play a role in a comprehensive strategy. Weighting other elements of national power at the expense of military power in such as strategy is misguided. Furthermore, U.S. military power carries considerable weight with the states of the GCC, who by-and-large, do not require economic or diplomatic incentives to cooperate with the United States. What these states do value and respect is military hardware and capability with respect to dissuading external actors such as Iran. Libya's decision to abandon its nuclear weapons program in the face of demonstrated resolve by the United States against Iraq in 2003 and Israeli airstrikes on Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities in 1981 and 2007, respectively, serves as evidence to potential proliferators that solutions are achieved through force alone.

Secondly, potential proliferators are more likely to develop a nuclear weapons capability if they believe that their nuclear patron is likely to abandon them, or potentially remain unengaged should another regional state proliferate. The security umbrella provided by the United States during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prevented many likely proliferators from pursuing nuclear weapons, especially under the conditions of uncertainty regarding Israeli programs and intentions. The potential of Iranian development in defiance of the NPT and the JCPOA could leave the United States facing the potential proliferation of several states across the region *simultaneously*, making the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) mission much more complex.

In order to meet the challenges posed by the potential of allied proliferation under the constraints of reduced military power, the United States must adopt a new engagement policy with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Primarily, engagement must be coordinated and conducted with the whole region in mind and less focused on individual states. Doing so will create more transparency among member states of the GCC, hopefully making them less likely to pursue nuclear weapons. Of course, while the decision of Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., or Kuwait to pursue nuclear weapons could be based on different factors, the increased validity of the GCC as a valid security framework is a start.

First, the United States must increase its willingness to work with and strengthen the regional institutions that will work to improve trust among potential proliferators that are looking to fulfill the nuclear desire. In the Middle East, the U.S. has focused on a variety of tools to influence regional allies and to further American interests. These tools have included large-scale military exercises, a wide range of Security Assistance (SA) initiatives, and exclusive basing agreements with these individual regional states. Although robust, the U.S. has historically preferred to work with its Middle Eastern allies on a bi-lateral basis instead of through a collective on matters of security and defense. This can be explained for several reasons.

The history of the U.S. in the region is much different than its actions in Europe at the end of World War II. Whereas the former European powers of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany lay in ruins at the end of the war; thus, increasing U.S. influence, the uniqueness of the Middle East invited a much more hesitant and gradual approach. Early on, the United States calculated that its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran,

what Nixon referred to as his Twin Pillar strategy, would be sufficient to promote regional stability, with little attention paid to the rest of the region. As Egypt emerged as a viable regional partner, and based upon its agreement to the Camp David Accords in 1977, a considerable amount of resources began to flow to the former Soviet ally. With the loss of Iran as a partner following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the United States reemphasized its partnership with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In the ensuing years, the U.S. has focused its energies on these primary allies, hedging that this relationship would be enough to meet its access requirements. As other states, like those that line the Persian Gulf, have continued to rise in importance, the United States has taken this unilateral engagement policy and applied it to these emerging states as well.

Despite the creation of the GCC, the United States remained committed to working with each state of the GCC independently on security and military issues. The GCC states themselves find it difficult to cooperate on security matters. Although formed as a security alliance in response to Iranian aggression following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the GCC did not establish a military component until 1984. Known as the Peninsula Shield Force, this 10,000 troop joint command saw little development over the succeeding years, and was still not developed enough by 1991 to participate in any meaningful way during the Gulf War. Instead, the individual states have historically pursued advanced weaponry and capabilities independently.

The role of the United States in fulfilling these needs cannot be understated. From 2009-2014, the Arms Transfer Agreements between the United States, Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., and Kuwait have totaled approximately \$7.5 billion (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Arms Transfer Agreements Between U.S. and GCC States (2009-2014)**  
*(Amounts in U.S. Dollars per million)*<sup>42</sup>

| <b>Saudi Arabia</b> | <b>U.A.E.</b> | <b>Kuwait</b> |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------|
| \$2732              | \$4039        | \$691         |

Although the type and model of equipment ordered from these GCC states spans almost the entire U.S. arsenal, some of the most common and high-end item equipment purchased has been fighter/attack aircraft (F-15, F-16, F-18), PATRIOT missile systems and radar, AMRAAM air-to-air missiles, and TOW missile systems.<sup>43</sup> These agreements represent lucrative defense contracts for U.S.-based industry and also cultivates familiarity between militaries should a coalition be required in the future through capacity-building measures.

Based on an increase in working with and empowering regional institutions, the United States should begin to explore the opportunities to tailor its Security Assistance programs across the GCC, specifically its Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) cases. Although the notion of a joint plan to acquire and share U.S. military hardware could affect these existing Security Assistance programs, the U.S. Department of Defense has begun to explore just that with NATO member states. As defense budgets have been strained across NATO, member states have expressed an interest in co-developing and acquiring weapons platforms as part of its Smart Defense program.<sup>44</sup> Although NATO is a much more established institution capable of such initiatives, the GCC could develop into an organization that could explore a similar arrangement with significant U.S. oversight. A form of Smart Defense for the GCC

would work to baseline the military capabilities of member states, which would reduce the prestige acquired by states with the most high-tech military hardware. If the prestige of owning this technology is reduced, it is possible that it could have an effect on the competition among states to acquire a nuclear weapon as symbol of similar prestige.

Finally, the United States should continue to expand its role as the facilitator and underwriter for military exercises involving regional states, especially as the future of Exercise BRIGHT STAR (the bi-annual exercise with Egypt) as the premier regional military exercise remains unclear. The United States has been working to expand mil-mil engagements and participation in formal military exercises that emphasizes widespread participation, like Exercise EAGER LION in Jordan. The 2015 iteration saw participation of 10,000 troops from a variety of nations, including Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Egypt, France, Iraq, Italy, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Poland, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom, in addition to the U.S. and Jordan.<sup>45</sup> The U.S. should encourage expanded participation among GCC states in multilateral military exercises, with the potential of those states hosting similar exercises in the future. As a positive note, Saudi Arabia has begun to host regional exercises with participation from GCC states such as Kuwait and the U.A.E.<sup>46</sup> This bodes well for strengthening the security applicability for the GCC as a whole and should be encouraged by the United States. Strengthening the GCC also serves to reduce the pressure upon Saudi Arabia as its regional hegemony is challenged by Iran. With increased capacity of GCC partners, Saudi Arabia seeks to gain a great deal in its aim to remain the regional hegemon, thus incentivizing it to cooperate with such an agenda.

As the importance of the Persian Gulf states on regional security increases and the role of Egypt decreases (not including its relationship with Israel), the United States should continue the trend of moving its focus eastward, especially in terms of military exercises and participation. Doing so would send very clear signals to the GCC and Iran.

In summary, the future international security environment could potentially find the U.S. needing to craft policies to dissuade allies in the Middle East from pursuing a nuclear weapons program. These efforts will need to be accomplished with a diminished footprint for U.S. military forces and resources in the region. The underlying models for why states pursue nuclear weapons is important for crafting appropriate strategies, as well as justifying the need for military power to undergird such a strategy. The status quo, that is, continued unilateral engagement from the United States with the individual GCC states mentioned here would do little to build trust and transparency, both of which are critical in dissuading nuclear proliferation. Furthermore, fears over abandonment by a nuclear patron could push states to weaponize civil nuclear energy programs.

This new strategy should be based upon increased engagement with the GCC as a whole, creating conditions for increased capacity levels for collaborative defense. This effort can be achieved through tailored security assistance programs, which could pursue NATO-like weapons acquisition and development that could be shared among GCC member states. The United States should also continue to encourage annual military exercises between regional states, with an aim of increased commitments of states like Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., and Kuwait hosting such events. This increase in military cooperation will work to strengthen bonds and develop more familiarity with like-minded partners who share a similar strategic outlook.

Although this paper has argued for the importance of military power in dissuading nuclear proliferation, it does not discount the stated “whole-of-government” approach. All elements of national power will be required to fulfill the desires of potential proliferators, however, military power as a means of satisfying such desires cannot be replaced by other elements. Proactive approaches that are founded on this principle will be much more successful and with lasting effects.

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