



Strategic Reassurance if Iran “Goes Nuclear”: A Framework and Some Propositions

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Introduction

Faced with continuing uncertainties about Iran’s nuclear weapon ambitions, reassurance and deterrence have figured prominently in our discussions of Gulf and wider Middle East security. During this workshop, presentations also have addressed what may yet be done in an attempt to influence Iran’s nuclear weapons calculus as talks begin between the P-5 + 1 and Iran. My presentation seeks to address issues of strategic reassurance if Iran crosses the nuclear weapon threshold.

More specifically, I first posit that Iran has crossed the nuclear weapon threshold. Then I briefly set out what I call the strategic reassurance legacy baseline, the set of measures used by the United States to reassure its NATO allies during the Cold War. My presentation then considers likely reassurance requirements on the part of countries in the Gulf and the wider Middle East confronting an emboldened newly-nuclear Iran. Against that backdrop, I set out a series of propositions about providing strategic reassurance if Iran succeeds in crossing the nuclear weapon threshold. Finally, I will offer some brief concluding thoughts that return to today’s question of “what next with Iran’s nuclear ambitions?”

Let me proceed.

The Initial Presumption—Iran Successfully Crosses the Nuclear Weapon Threshold

My presentation’s initial presumption is that Iran’s has successfully crossed the nuclear weapon threshold. This starting assumption is based partly on the many good reasons for believing that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons and on still other reasons for doubting that diplomatic efforts to convince it to change course will succeed. These reasons range from the multiple Iranian motivations to acquire nuclear weapons through Iran’s pattern of secrecy and militarily involvement in its nuclear program to the historic limitations of international sanctions in forcing governments’ to change strongly-held policies.

In turn, my starting assumption that Iran succeeds in crossing the nuclear weapon threshold also presupposes that Israel, the United States, or some combination of the United States, France, and the United Kingdom do not use to military force to destroy its enrichment facilities and Natanz and Qom—or that such use of force proves unsuccessful. Even then, a military attack might only buy time.

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2009		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Strategic Reassurance if Iran 'Goes Nuclear': A Framework and Some Propositions				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School,Center on Contemporary Conflict,Monterey,CA,93943				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 10	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Thus, like Pakistan and North Korea before it, Iran could well cross the nuclear weapon threshold all the while protesting its only “peaceful nuclear intentions.”

Providing Reassurance—Lessons from the Cold War Legacy Baseline

In thinking about strategic reassurance against a newly-nuclear Iran, my starting point is U.S. strategic reassurance of Europe during the Cold War. American efforts to reassure its allies that the United States would support them—up to and including via waging a nuclear war with the Soviet Union—were at the heart of U.S. and NATO security strategy and posture from the late 1940s through the late 1980s. In effect, the Cold War experience provides what I shall term the strategic reassurance legacy baseline.

Let me acknowledge right away that there are significant differences between past strategic reassurance of Europe facing the Soviet Union and prospective reassurance of Gulf and other Middle East countries facing a nuclear-armed Iran. Perhaps most importantly, unlike in Cold War Europe, most but not all officials and experts across the region believe that the danger of outright military aggression—let alone use of a nuclear weapon—by a nuclear-armed Iran is quite low. But there also are important potential similarities. As was so for Cold War Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there is a comparable danger today of low-level military actions that could escalate; political threats, blackmail, and intimidation; domestic meddling; and not least, of nuclear weapons casting their shadow over the political, economic, and social evolution of the Gulf and wider Middle East.

There is another reason for taking the Cold War strategic reassurance legacy baseline as a starting point—to broaden our thinking about possible reassurance options or measures to consider or pursue. When the issue of strategic reassurance is addressed, quite often, strategic reassurance is equated with U.S. extended nuclear deterrence. During the Cold War, an American nuclear guarantee—as well as very extensive nuclear activities on the part of the United States with countries in Europe—clearly was an important part of strategic reassurance. But there also were many other means of reassurance that came into play over the Cold War period.

More specifically, all of the following means of strategic reassurance came into play:

- Institutional mechanisms;
- Declaratory policy;
- Conventional military deployments and joint engagement;
- Extended nuclear deterrence and engagement; and
- Political, personal, and economic linkages.

To repeat, I shall call these means of strategic reassurance the Cold War legacy baseline. Let me go over these measures very briefly—setting aside for the moment the question of which ones

might be applicable for providing reassurance to countries in the Gulf and wider Middle East facing a nuclear-emboldened Iran.

Institutional Mechanisms. From the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949 creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a formal alliance tie has been a key element of U.S. strategic reassurance to its European allies. Within the NATO alliance, institutionalized processes of defense consultation and decision-making also were put in place. Not least, over a period of decades, habits of defense cooperation were built that served to create linkages, a sense of shared purpose, and mutual commitment among the NATO countries and across the Atlantic.

Declaratory Policy. Declaratory policy also was a continuing means of Cold War strategic reassurance. In some instances, declaratory policy involved statements by the U.S. president or other senior U.S. officials expressing U.S. solidarity with America's NATO allies and readiness to come to the defense of those allies (including with the use of nuclear weapons). Formal NATO "Political and Strategic Documents" also were a means of strategic reassurance, as exemplified in the 10th June 1982 declaration that: "The presence of North American armed forces in Europe and the United States strategic nuclear commitment to Europe remain integral to Allied security."^[1]

Conventional Military Deployments and Engagement. From the 1950s onward, large-scale on-the-ground deployments of U.S. conventional forces to Europe were another means of strategic reassurance to NATO Europe. At the height of the Cold War, there were hundreds of thousands of American military personnel deployed at bases across Western Europe. The creation of an integrated NATO military force along with joint military command arrangements, joint military programs and procurements, and an overarching process of joint military planning all served to reinforce this dimension of reassurance. All of the NATO military forces would stand or fall together, with little if any opportunity for one country to withdraw its military capabilities and commitment in the event of conflict.

Extended Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Engagement. The U.S. nuclear guarantee to Europe as reflected in an overall posture of extended nuclear deterrence was another integral element of the Cold War strategic reassurance baseline. A web of measures came into existence. Statements by officials from the U.S. president downward emphasized the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in deterring Soviet aggression against Europe—and the U.S. commitment to use those forces on behalf of Europe if the need arose. At home, U.S. nuclear weapons posture, planning, deployments, and programs all were partly driven by the requirements of extending the nuclear deterrent to cover U.S. NATO allies. Abroad, the United States deployed nuclear weapons in many NATO countries as the Cold War confrontation continued, partly to symbolize the Trans-Atlantic nuclear linkage but also to couple U.S. strategic nuclear capabilities to a conflict in Europe. Still other nuclear weapons were dedicated to an alliance role though not deployed on the ground in Europe. Closely related, beginning in the 1960s, the United States initiated programs of nuclear cooperation with European allies. What came to be known as nuclear burden-sharing included the possible release of U.S. nuclear weapons to U.S. allies to carry out

NATO nuclear missions in wartime. Joint nuclear planning also took place, including under the Nuclear Planning Group created in the mid-1960s to enhance the strategic reassurance element of extended nuclear deterrence.

Linkages—Political, Personal, and Economic. Many types of Trans-Atlantic political, personal, and economic linkages between the United States and European allies also contributed to strategic reassurance, helping to strengthen confidence that the United States would stand by its European allies in a confrontation with the Soviet Union. Presidential and other high level visits were used to signal American commitment and to reaffirm ties across the Atlantic. Aside from historic personal ties between “Euro-Americans” and their native lands, there was a large American civilian presence in Europe (wives and children of deployed military personnel, employees of overseas corporations and businesses, and tourists). Postwar American economic linkages with European countries as well as significant economic interdependencies and habits of cooperation also were a means of reassurance of the American connection. All of these linkages meant that a conflict in Europe would directly impact American lives from the very start.

Crisis Behavior. Though not a means of strategic reassurance per se, how the United States behaved in crises involving the Soviet Union also impacted allies’ perceptions of the U.S.-connection—sometimes for the better but also sometimes for worse. In that regard, U.S. readiness to stand up to Soviet blandishments and threats of unilateral action in the repeated Berlin Crises of 1959-1961 served to reassure U.S. allies as did the measured mix of political diplomacy and military measures brought to bear in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

No Population Protection. Protection of the American or allies’ population is a missing element within this Cold War legacy baseline of strategic reassurance measures. In principle, the capability to limit damage to the United States from a Soviet nuclear attack would have enhanced the credibility of American extended nuclear deterrence in the eyes of America’s European allies if not also that of Soviet leaders. In practice, it came to be recognized that population protection was an unrealistic goal against the Soviet nuclear threat. Similarly, it also was acknowledged that protection of European populations was not an attainable goal.

Two Final Considerations from the Cold War Legacy Baseline

Two final points are warranted with regard to the Cold War strategic reassurance legacy baseline. Specifically:

First, with regard to which of these measures was “most important,” in what specific formulation or configuration, at what point in time, different observers on the two sides of the Atlantic likely would give different answers. Regardless of such issues, taken together, this set of measures came to provide a robust structure of strategic reassurance to U.S. NATO allies.

Second, during the Cold War decades, concern about the need for reinvigorating trans-Atlantic cooperation came to be one of the continuing cross-currents of the U.S. strategic reassurance

relationship with its NATO allies. Thus, it would be wrong to assume that there were not “ups and downs” in dealings among the allies—or for that matter, to assume that from the 1940s vantage point of a Western Europe just emerging from the destruction of World War II and now facing a Soviet military-nuclear threat, successful strategic reassurance to America’s European allies was a forgone conclusion. Innovative actions and dedicated leaderships on both sides of the Atlantic made a big difference in the outcome.

Providing Strategic Reassurance—Exploring Options for the Gulf and Wider Middle East

Let me turn then to possible options for strategic reassurance to countries within the Gulf and wider Middle East if Iran crosses the nuclear weapon threshold. Here, it first is necessary to provide an answer to the more basic question of “strategic reassurance against what?”

Strategic Reassurance Requirements[2]

Depending on the specific country in the Gulf and the wider Middle East, whether, why, and how much to be concerned about the emergence of a newly-nuclear Iran varies. Across the region, however, three overarching concerns stand out for this discussion of options for strategic reassurance[3]:

- **Intensified Iranian Intimidation, Political Intervention, and Support for Extremist Groups.** Among virtually all of Iran’s neighbors, there is considerable concern that once in possession of nuclear weapons, the Iranian leadership could intensify its interference in those neighbors’ domestic politics, step up support for extremist groups, and use the shadow of nuclear weapons to shape regional relations in a manner more favorable to it.
- **Iranian Low-Level Military or Para-Military Actions.** There also are concerns that a nuclear-emboldened Iran could resort to low-level military or para-military actions in an attempt to dominate the Gulf and weaken its smaller neighbors. Iranian actions could range from harassing shipping to attacks on critical infrastructure, from para-military intervention in Iraq to efforts even to close the Gulf. However, with exceptions, there appears to be less concern about major military aggression a la Saddam Hussein’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait—though there is concern that possession of nuclear weapons would reinforce Iran’s activism in existing territorial disputes such as that over the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa.
- **Iranian Nuclear Threats or Use.** Within Gulf and the wider Middle East region, there are very different perceptions of how seriously to take the possibility of Iranian use of a nuclear weapon—and thus the need for reassurance of support in countering the former or deterring or preventing the latter. Most but not all Arab governments appear to discount significantly Iran’s possible use of a nuclear weapon against them—if not also the direct threat of such use rather than simply indirectly manipulating the nuclear shadow in the preceding two possibilities.

Given these three reassurance requirements, which of the baseline legacy reassurance measures might have a role to play in a Gulf and wider Middle East region facing a newly-nuclear Iran? Time precludes a detailed answer to that question here. Instead, let me first list a set of “tests” for

thinking about the answer to that question and then put forward a series of working propositions for further discussion and analysis.

Some Possible “Tests” for Evaluating the Strategic Reassurance Baseline Legacy

Five metrics stand out for exploring the applicability of the different measures as means to provide strategic reassurance to countries in the Gulf and wider Middle East region in the situation posited here. These are:

- Payoffs—to what extent would a particular measure respond to one of the posited three overarching requirements for strategic reassurance;
- Feasibility—to what extent would it be technically and militarily feasible—to implement a given measure (see below on political acceptability);
- Risks—to what extent would a particular measure have possibly adverse risks, including spillovers within the region or globally;
- Acceptability within the region—to what extent would a particular measure be supported by leadership, elites, and publics in countries within the region; and
- Acceptability to providers—to what extent would a particular measure be supported by the American leadership, Congress, and public, or those of other possible outsider providers of strategic reassurance.

Some Working Propositions

In light of these “tests,” let me offer now a number of propositions about providing or strengthening strategic reassurance against a nuclear-emboldened Iran. These propositions track with the main baskets so to speak of the Cold War reassurance baseline. I put these propositions forward as a basis for discussion—and not as firm, hard judgments. O.K. . . .

Don’t Look to Formal Alliance Ties. Turning first to institutional reassurance measures, in principle, formal treaty-based alliance commitments would have considerable reassurance potential; in practice, formal alliance commitments are unlikely to be politically acceptable to elites and publics in either virtually all Middle East countries or outsiders looking for ways to extend reassurance. That said, while apparently stopping short of a formal security guarantee, existing defense cooperation agreements, e.g., between the United States and most Gulf States, do create a strong presumption of support. This is especially so against intensified intimidation or low-level or asymmetric activities by a newly-nuclear Iran. For both reasons, an initial reassurance measure would be to reaffirm publicly these existing defense pacts.

Continue Building Habits of Defense Cooperation. Within the framework provided by such defense agreements as well as otherwise, continued actions to strengthen habits of defense cooperation would have significant payoffs for strategic reassurance. Within the Gulf, for example, the multilateral Gulf Security Dialogue could be further strengthened with a focus on the threats posed by a newly-nuclear Iran. One such area I shall discuss further later concerns

cooperation in protecting populations against WMD threats. Building such habits of cooperation would reinforce a sense of common purpose and mutual commitment.

Provide Pledges of U.S. and other Friendly Outsider Support. Turning to declaratory policy, consideration could be given to formal pledges of U.S. (and that of other friendly outsiders) support against threats from a newly-nuclear Iran. Such pledges would go beyond today's existing defense pacts. They also would need to cover support against Iranian nuclear threats. A failure to make such pledges would be politically important both for Iran's Gulf and other Middle East neighbors and for the Iranian leadership. However, the risks and political acceptability of providing such pledges of support—and their credibility within the region—could depend heavily on the extent to which parallel measures are taken to neutralize threats of Iranian nuclear attack against outside security guarantors. It also would be important to reinforce pledges of support with other, more concrete reassurance actions.

Sustain the American Military Presence. As the war in Iraq winds down, the American military presence and deployments in the Gulf will be reduced. Whether U.S. deployments return to the levels and mix of land and naval forces before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq remain to be determined. Sustaining and reaffirming that presence would be another measure to provide reassurance of American support against a nuclear-emboldened Iran. (Similarly, France's military presence in Abu Dhabi also provides strategic reassurance to Gulf countries.)

Strengthen Joint Military Planning, Operations, and Programs. Building on ongoing activities, steps to strengthen further joint military planning, operations, and programs involving the United States, other friendly outsiders, and Gulf countries would be another potentially important strategic reassurance step. In particular, such joint activities could be tailored to countering the types of low-level military, asymmetric, or para-military threats that a nuclear-emboldened Iran could pose to countries within the Gulf. Joint programs to enhance population protection, not only against Iranian ballistic missiles but also other non-conventional and terrorist threats, also could be important examples.

Pursue Population Protection. Protecting the populations of both friendly outsiders and countries within the region against Iranian threats—from terrorist attacks with conventional explosives to threatened Iranian use of WMD, from threats from unconventional delivery means to ballistic missiles—would have important payoffs for strategic reassurance facing a newly-nuclear Iran. Directly, enhanced population protection could well reduce considerably the risks to the United States and any other outsiders of coming to the support of threatened Gulf or wider Middle East friends. As a result, pledges of support would gain credibility and acceptability—and be more readily carried out should the need arise. Within the region, enhanced protection against a full-spectrum of threats to populations would reduce the risks of confronting a newly-nuclear Iran, reassuring both publics and elites. Within the Gulf, actions to enhance population protection would build on past initiatives dating from the 1990s, partly reinvigorated in recent years.

Recognize a More Circumscribed Role for Extended Nuclear Deterrence. Unlike Cold War Europe, many Gulf and Middle East officials and experts consider the threat of Iran's direct nuclear blackmail and especially use of nuclear weapons to be unlikely. If so, extended nuclear deterrence could play a somewhat more circumscribed role in strategic reassurance of countries in the Gulf and wider Middle East facing a newly-nuclear Iran—excepting Israel with its concerns about nuclear attack. Nonetheless, bringing outsider nuclear deterrent capabilities to bear would remain important to counter implicit or explicit Iranian nuclear posturing in the background of lower-level intervention or asymmetric conflict. The promise of U.S. (and possibly other outsider) nuclear retaliation also would be important to ensure that regardless of the scenario, nuclear use remained a bad alternative for Iran. In turn, it also would provide a compelling incentive for Iran's leadership to take seriously the importance of rigorous control over nuclear weapons to avoid unauthorized nuclear use or transfers.

Dedicate National Assets for Extended Nuclear Deterrence. With regard to the modalities of extending nuclear deterrence, many if not most of the elements of the Cold War extended nuclear deterrence legacy baseline cannot be replicated in a Gulf or wider Middle East confronting a newly-nuclear Iran. Reasons of technical and military feasibility, political acceptability in the region, and political acceptability abroad all suggest as much. However, the United States, perhaps joined by other friendly outside powers, should seriously consider pledging its readiness to come to the support of countries facing Iranian nuclear threats or use. Such a nuclear guarantee could be more or less explicit in terms of committing U.S. nuclear assets. To enhance the credibility of a U.S. (or other outsider) nuclear guarantee, specific national nuclear assets could be dedicated to the extended deterrence mission vis-à-vis Iran. These assets could be within the guarantor's national territory (e.g., a specific squadron of land-based ICBMs based in the United States) or they could be at sea (e.g., a specified number of SLBMs)—or both. In addition, other non-nuclear assets could be given part of this mission of extending deterrence, including longer-range deep strike capabilities with conventional warheads.

Highlight Existing Linkages. For the most part, the types of outsider personal linkages and presence that undergirded the Cold War Trans-Atlantic reassurance relationship are absent or very localized with Gulf and Middle East countries. However, high-level visits still would provide a political means to signal support and provide reassurance. The strong economic energy interdependencies also could be highlighted and clearly create a strong presumption of support against possible low-level or para-military action aimed at disrupting oil infrastructure or flows from the region.

Don't Acquiesce to Iran's Crossing the Nuclear Weapon Threshold. How the United States, the other great powers, and the wider international community respond if Iran crosses the nuclear weapon threshold will also impact the perceived requirements for strategic reassurance as well as the credibility of reassurance efforts. Suffice it to suggest that the most damaging outcome could be international acquiescence in Iran's emergence as a nuclear weapon state. If so, it would be important to make Iran pay a price for its decision. How best to do so will be a subject of considerable debate but could include taking steps to isolate Iran as an international pariah. The

price of making Iran pay a price is likely to be intensified Iranian interference in the affairs of its neighbors, support for terrorism, and possibly other destabilizing responses. But the costs of failing to do so in terms of even further emboldening Iran's leadership and undermining confidence elsewhere could well be even higher.

Go Beyond the Cold War “America Who” for Strategic Reassurance

During the Cold War, the responsibility for providing strategic reassurance to NATO Europe primarily was borne by the United States. Assuming Iran crosses the nuclear weapon threshold, countries in the Gulf and the wider Middle East are likely to look again toward the United States for reassurance of support but not exclusively so. Depending on the Gulf or Middle East country, Paris or London also could be seen as friendly sources of reassurance—in conjunction with or as an alternative to reliance on the United States. At the least, therefore, close coordination is in order among the United States, France, and the United Kingdom in providing assurance within the region. Going a step further, the three countries could discuss possible joint actions—from extended deterrence pledges of support to integrated preparations to respond to destabilizing activities by a nuclear-emboldened Iran.

A Closing Thought—Strategic Reassurance and Avoiding a Newly-Nuclear Iran

Against the backdrop of the October 1, 2009 meeting of representatives of the P-5 + 1 countries and Iran, most of the discussion of how to influence Iran's calculations has focused on the threat of intensified sanctions to increase the price of its nuclear pursuits. References to “all options being on the table” also have been designed to suggest the possibility of a military strike—as have acknowledgment of the possibility of Israeli military action. In turn, the recent reorientation of the U.S. ballistic missile defense program toward neutralizing Iran's existing shorter-range and medium-range missile threat is an important step to lessen the benefits to Iran of crossing the nuclear weapon threshold.

Many of the actions proposed here for strategic reassurance within the Gulf and wider Middle East if Iran cannot be prevented from crossing the nuclear weapons threshold could be taken or signaled now to reinforce other efforts to influence the calculations of Iran's leadership. Such actions would be part of a broader effort to signal those leaders that the United States, France, and the United Kingdom—with other countries if possible—would join together to ensure that Iran would not gain by crossing the nuclear-weapon threshold. Specific actions would include:

- Taking additional publicly visible steps to strengthen habits of defense cooperation with Gulf countries and others in the wider Middle East, including against the types of Iranian intervention, asymmetric threats, and low-level para-military actions that are frequently cited as the top concerns;
- Intensified efforts to strengthen cooperation and integration among the United States, other outsiders, and Gulf countries to neutralize possible Iranian lower-level asymmetric and para-military activities;

- Highest-level pledges of support (including a joint U.S.-France-UK pledge of support against Iranian nuclear posturing, blackmail, and use);
- Intensified efforts at population protection both for outsiders and for countries in the Gulf (including but not limited to missile defense cooperation); and
- Initiating planning and preparations for bringing U.S. and other outsider nuclear assets to bear to provide a counter to the Iranian nuclear shadow and to ensure Iran's leaders understand the grave risks of nuclear adventurism.

By way of conclusion, it may be too late to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear weapon threshold. If that turns out to be the case, having begun now to pursue the types of measures discussed here would provide the baseline for a later strategy aimed at reassuring countries in the Gulf and wider Middle East (including extending nuclear deterrence). These measures also would fit a broader strategy of ensuring that a nuclear-emboldened Iran would not gain.

About the Author

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3. As noted by Kaye and Wehrey, op. cit., there also are other concerns of countries within the region, including the risk of an Iranian nuclear accident, the danger of being caught in a "cross-fire" between Iran and the United States, possible U.S. acquiescence in a Saudi claim to "Gulf dominance," and the dangers of a regional proliferation cascade.