



CONTAINING AND DETERRING A NUCLEAR IRAN

QUESTIONS FOR STRATEGY,
REQUIREMENTS FOR MILITARY FORCES

THOMAS DONNELLY, DANIELLE PLETKA,
AND MASEH ZARIF

WITH A FOREWORD BY FREDERICK W. KAGAN



A REPORT BY THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

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Cover image: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) tests nuclear-capable Shahab-3 missiles during the first phase of military maneuvers in the central desert outside the holy city of Qom, November 2, 2006. (AFP/Getty Images)

Foreword

The challenge of a nuclear Iran will be among the most difficult the United States has faced. Iran will not soon pose an existential threat to the United States in the way that the Soviet Union did from the 1960s until its collapse—at least, not in the sense that it will have a nuclear arsenal capable of literally annihilating the United States. But Iran will reach another threshold by acquiring nuclear weapons—the ability to keep America and its allies in constant fear. For a state that has formed its national security policy largely around terrorism, that is quite an accomplishment. It will unquestionably change American foreign and national security policy profoundly for the foreseeable future and introduce a source of permanent unease into a region and a world already suffering from more than enough worry and distress.

Many American and international leaders have said that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is unacceptable for these and other reasons. But at this moment it seems nearly certain that the international community, including the United States, will accept it. Anything is possible, but it is very difficult to imagine the current American administration going to war with Iran to prevent Tehran from advancing its nuclear program, whatever reports come out of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or elsewhere. None of America's allies, apart from Israel, will take military action. There is no reason to imagine that a sanctions regime, or attempts to "isolate" Iran diplomatically, will succeed in the next year or two, having already failed spectacularly for more than a decade. And with the US failure to secure a binding relationship with Iraq, it is much more likely that the sanctions regime will steadily erode as Tehran uses Iraq to bypass it.

The Iranians thus face an opportune policy window during which sound strategy would lead them to field a nuclear capability if they have the ability to do so. The Obama administration seems certain not to attack. But the outcome of the next American presidential election is entirely uncertain, and the attitudes of some of the Republican candidates—particularly, the front-runners—are much less clear. Strategically, Iran's leaders would be foolish to wait until after November 2012 to acquire the capability to permanently deter an American attack on their nuclear program.

Sound American strategy thus requires assuming that Iran will have a weaponized nuclear capability when the next president takes office in January 2013. The Iranians may not test a device before then, depending, perhaps, on the rhetoric of the current president and his possible successor, but we must assume that they will have at least one.

The prospect of an Israeli strike in the interim—the odds of which have increased again in the wake of the president's decision to withdraw all US forces from Iraq at the end of this year—do not necessarily alter this calculus much. The Israeli Air Force can no doubt strike known facilities in Iran, including the enrichment facility at Natanz. It can likely destroy any above-ground structures and verify their destruction. It may be able to destroy known buried structures, such as those at Natanz, but verification may prove much more difficult. The biggest problem is that the known facilities are primarily those involved in the enrichment process—creating the nuclear fuel that would go into a weapon. Do the Israelis know the locations of all of the facilities in which that fuel might be mated with a warhead? Can they hit and destroy them? Can they, or anyone else, be certain when the dust has settled that they have

gotten them all? If the Iranian leadership pops up the next day and says, “You missed! We still have a weapon!” then what? The United States will almost certainly be forced to behave as though this is true, and the following months and years will be spent attempting to prove or disprove the claim—and to examine Iran’s almost-inevitable efforts to rebuild its program (probably without benefit of IAEA access). And all that is to say nothing of the regional and even global consequences of an Israeli strike and an Iranian response.

The next American president is very likely to find himself or herself willy-nilly pursuing a policy of containing a nuclear Iran—or, at least, an Iran suspected of having nuclear weapons rather than simply of having a program that could produce them. Yet there is no such policy now under development (since no world leader can explicitly discuss a possibility he has dismissed as “unacceptable”), and little thought has been given to what such a policy might look like. When the project that produced this report began, we believed it was important to compare the costs and challenges of a containment strategy against other possible courses of action aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. But the situation has changed. Our task is now to

start setting the terms of the discussion about what a successful strategy of containing a nuclear Iran will look like.

Make no mistake—it would be vastly preferable for the United States and the world to find a way to prevent Iran from crossing that threshold, and we wholeheartedly endorse ongoing efforts that might do so. But some of the effort now focused on how to tighten the sanctions screws must shift to the problem of how to deal with the consequences when sanctions fail. That is the aim of this paper, and we hope it will become the aim of a significant portion of the Iran policy community sooner rather than later.

Note: I was a part of this discussion and this project from the outset, but circumstances required me to spend the period during which it was written in Afghanistan. I was not able, therefore, to take part in writing it, as I and my colleagues had originally expected, leaving them to carry the burden alone. They have done so brilliantly, and I proudly associate myself with the work they have produced.

—Frederick W. Kagan

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Key Findings

- Many have suggested that containing a nuclear Iran is a reasonable option, possibly more desirable than confrontation. The United States may choose the containment of Iran as the least-worst option. Alternatively, containment may be thrust upon us at the moment Iran becomes a nuclear state, a moment that has been difficult to predict in the past.
- Containment is hardly a cost-free policy, but aside from a small handful of policy sketches proffered heretofore, little thought has gone into what an effective containment and deterrent regime will require of the United States and its allies.
- Even without a nuclear weapon, Iran is difficult to deter: its diffuse leadership structures and constant domestic power struggles make it hard to determine which individual leaders, groups of leaders and institutions should be the objects and targets of deterrence. Furthermore, the Iranian approach to military power is a highly asymmetrical strategy that substitutes nuclear weapons, irregulars, proxies, and terrorism for conventional strength.
- Modeled on Cold War containment practices, the following are essential components of a coherent Iran containment policy: that it should seek to block any Iranian expansion in the Persian Gulf region; to illuminate the problematic nature of the regime's ambitions; to constrain and indeed to "induce a retraction" of Iranian influence, including Iranian "soft power"; and to work toward a political—if not a physical—transformation of the Tehran regime.
- A further essential characteristic of Cold War containment applicable to Iran is that such a policy demands a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach driven by consistent diplomacy. Containing Iran requires effecting the isolation of the Iranian regime, disconnecting it from great power patrons, limiting its ability to peel off neighbors and regional players to serve its agenda, limiting its use of proxies, and more.
- The keystone of any containment policy is a military strategy of deterrence. An Iran policy of containment must meet the basic Cold War standard of credibility, which includes three criteria. The deterrent posture depends on an adequate US nuclear arsenal of offensive systems; a substantial investment in forward-deployed and reinforcing conventional forces; and the preservation of strong alliances that permit relatively good policy integration, military cooperation, and basing and access for US forces.
- Adopting a serious policy of containment and strategy of deterrence will have implications for US nuclear policy and forces. A credible US offensive deterrent must be "persistent": that is, dedicated forces must be active, available, and "present," at least

in the mind of the adversary. In addition, the role of US offensive nuclear forces as the central feature of a “defense umbrella” covering American allies and their interests across the greater Middle East will be critical. Current policies and plans, however, do not reflect such considerations.

- A serious policy of containment and deterrence calls for a constant and significant conventional force presence around Iran’s perimeter. Current US nuclear forces are not well prepared to provide deterrence against a nuclear Iran, and the deterrent value of US conventional supremacy is being undercut by continuous and well-publicized reductions in defense spending, which has been marked, in recent years, by a growing number of terminations and cancellations of the very weapons most likely to provide a proximate danger in Tehran’s eyes.
- US military planners must also consider the feasibility of eliminating Iran’s nuclear retaliatory options in a single raid or rapid-strike campaign given that Iran stands on the brink of developing not just a single weapon but a modest breakout capability for a more robust arsenal that would provide a survivable deterrent.
- The diplomatic, strategic, and military costs of containing and deterring are already

high. Consider the military costs alone: a renewed offensive nuclear deterrent, both in the United States and extended to the region; prolonged counterintelligence, counterterrorist, and counterinsurgency operations around Iran’s perimeter; a large and persistent conventional covering force operating throughout the region and a reinforcing force capable of assured regime change; and energetic military-to-military programs with coalition partners. Such a deterrent posture is not only near or beyond the limits of current US forces—and we know of no substantial body of studies that has analyzed in sufficient detail the requirements for a containment posture—but also would certainly surpass the capabilities of the reduced US military that proposed budget cuts would produce.

- In conclusion, we find that though containment and deterrence are possible policies and strategies for the United States and others to adopt when faced with a nuclear Iran, we cannot share the widespread enthusiasm entertained in many quarters. Indeed, the broad embrace of containment and deterrence appears to be based primarily on an unwillingness to analyze the risks and costs described. Containing and deterring may be the least-bad choice. However, that does not make it a low-risk or low-cost choice. In fact, it is about to be not a choice but a fact of life.

Executive Summary

It has long been the policy of the US government that a nuclear-armed Iran would be unacceptable. Yet, whether the conventional and nontraditional means of US and Western policy can secure the end of keeping Tehran from fulfilling its longtime nuclear ambition is far from clear. While it is possible military action will deprive Iran of its nuclear option, that the current regime in the Islamic Republic will be overthrown, or that sanctions will bring the regime to the table with meaningful concessions, there is also every possibility that none of these scenarios will come to pass. Moreover, if there is a rising consensus that sanctions ultimately will fail, there is an equally strong belief among the foreign-policy establishment in Washington and other Western capitals that preemptive military action is unappealing, leading many to suggest that containing a nuclear Iran is a reasonable option. Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, all the tools used heretofore will remain on the table, but there will be a new layer of strategic challenges and constraints—not simply the day after but also well into the future.

Containment is hardly a cost-free policy, but aside from a small handful of policy sketches, little thought has gone into what an effective containment and deterrent regime will require of the United States and its allies. The public discussion of containing a nuclear Iran has been conducted in a haze of good feeling about the successes of the Cold War, but containing the Soviet Union was hardly simple. The successes of the Cold War policy certainly provide a framework for thinking about the difficulties of a nuclear Iran, even allowing for the unique circumstances of the two situations and the different and unique ideologies embraced by both adversaries. A deeper examination of the original Cold War policy choices is necessary.

Throughout the Cold War, the policy of containment oscillated between periods of strategic expansion and contraction, but the underlying policy remained remarkably consistent. Those principles are essential components of a coherent Iran containment policy: that it should seek to block any Iranian expansion in the Persian Gulf region; to illuminate the problematic nature of the regime's ambitions; to constrain and indeed to "induce a retraction" of Iranian influence, including Iranian "soft power"; and to work toward a political transformation, if not a physical transformation, of the Tehran regime.

A further essential characteristic of Cold War containment applicable to Iran is that such a policy demands a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach driven by consistent diplomacy. Containing Iran requires effecting the isolation of the Iranian regime, disconnecting it from great power patrons, limiting its ability to peel off neighbors and regional players to serve its agenda, limiting its use of proxies, and more. The isolation of Iran should not be intended as a punishment for nuclear transgressions, but rather as a means of limiting Iranian exploitation of its newfound status as a nuclear power. The US government will need to build and institutionalize coalitions to box Iran in to deny it the opportunity to project power.

Beyond diplomacy and sanctions, containing a nuclear Iran will require increased efforts on other fronts, to include but not be limited to competing with and disrupting Iranian regional and global economic strategy, working with allies to diminish Iranian influence in energy markets, and supporting effective opposition groups. But as Cold War precedent reveals, and as many advocates of containing Iran acknowledge, the keystone of any containment policy is a military strategy of deterrence.

The United States has been practicing a loose form of deterrence against Iran for the better part of three decades, yet the range of possible conflict points has mushroomed. What might be called the canonical military threat from Iran—the closing of the Strait of Hormuz—remains a serious concern, as do a variety of direct Iranian threats such as regular harassment of US shipping by Iranian small boats. Further, the dangers of Iranian irregular combatants or proxies are a critical and possibly existential worry to the United States’ newest allies in the region: Iraq and Afghanistan. Now, the shadow of Iran’s nuclear program casts a pall from the Persian Gulf to Europe, Central Asia, and South Asia. A central question for a strategy of deterrence is which Iranian leaders, groups of leaders, and institutions are the objects and targets of deterrence. Iran’s diffuse leadership structures and constant domestic power struggles make the job of deterrence extremely challenging. Taken in sum, even without a nuclear weapon of its own, Iran is difficult to deter; the current *de facto* deterrence regime does not prevent Iran from isolated acts of military aggression or aggression by Iranian proxies.

While there can never be certain deterrence, Cold War presidents often had confidence that the United States had sufficient military power to support a policy of containment through a strategy of deterrence. For most of the period they felt deterrence was assured. Assured regime-change capability is required to have confidence in a policy of containment and a strategy of deterrence toward Tehran. An Iran policy of containment based upon a strategy of deterrence must meet the basic Cold War standard of credibility, which included three criteria. The deterrent posture depends on an adequate US nuclear arsenal of offensive systems; a substantial investment in forward-deployed and reinforcing conventional forces, and the preservation of strong alliances that permit relatively good policy integration, military cooperation, and basing and access for US forces.

The success of this inherently complicated endeavor demanded—as a similar effort toward Iran would demand—an immense and sustained US effort.

Adopting a policy of containment and a policy of deterrence would have implications for US nuclear policy and forces. Current policies and plans, however, do not reflect such considerations, and current US nuclear forces are not well prepared to provide deterrence against a nuclear Iran. A serious policy of containment and strategy of deterrence calls for constant and significant conventional force presence around Iran’s perimeter, yet the deterrent value of US conventional forces is uncertain, if only because US policy and posture throughout the region is in flux.

Two questions require analysis: What kind of force is operationally capable of conducting a regime-change campaign in Iran? What kind of threat would be understood by the Iranian regime as a credible deterrent? Current US defense planning is entirely devoid of such analysis, and the military posture required for containment and deterrence cannot be assumed. In both nuclear and conventional realms, the United States and its “containment coalition” partners are likely to lack the military means to make a deterrent posture credible either to the Iranians—who are inherently difficult to deter—or to ourselves. This reprises a recurring Cold War lesson: empty attempts at containment and deterrence are not just half-answers but positive incentives to an adversary ambitious for power and predisposed to discover weakness and regard itself with a historic destiny.

For containment and deterrence to succeed, the United States will need to demonstrate that it can deter both Iran’s use of nuclear weapons and aggression by Tehran’s network of partners and terrorist proxies. The United States also has a concomitant requirement to assure its allies in the region and around the world of its commitment to stability in the region. Underlying all of this is the classic requirement that the United States be capable of demonstrating its ability to execute a declaratory policy to respond to a possible Iranian nuclear attack. The United States has neither the forces available nor the capability under current projections to do so.

In conclusion, we find that though containment and deterrence are possible policies and strategies

for the United States and others to adopt when faced with a nuclear Iran, we cannot share the widespread enthusiasm entertained in many quarters. Indeed, the broad embrace of containment and deterrence appears to be based primarily on an unwillingness

to analyze the risks and costs described. It may be the case that containing and deterring is the least-bad choice. However, that does not make it a low-risk or low-cost choice. In fact, it is about to be not a choice but a fact of life.

Introduction

It has long been the policy of the United States government that a nuclear-armed Iran would be unacceptable. “It is unacceptable to the United States. It is unacceptable to Israel. It is unacceptable to the region and the international community,” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared last year.¹ As he was running for president in 2008, Barack Obama told Fox News that “it is unacceptable for Iran to possess a nuclear weapon; it would be a game changer.”² This was only an extension of previous Bush administration policy; an Iranian nuclear weapon “to blackmail or threaten the world” would be “unacceptable.”³ Even French President Nicolas Sarkozy used the word, saying, “If Iran develops nuclear weapons, it’s unacceptable to our country.”⁴

Whether the means of US and Western policy—sanctions—can secure the end of keeping Tehran from fulfilling its longtime nuclear ambition is far from clear. There is also a persistent belief that nontraditional means, such as the Stuxnet computer-virus attack or covert sabotage operations, can keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons without provoking a confrontation. Even if these reports are accurate, they amount to no more than a postponement of the day of reckoning. As Patrick Cronin of the Center for a New American Security, a think tank close to the Obama administration, observed, “There is no credible evidence that the current Iranian regime can be dissuaded from crossing that fateful point to possessing the bomb.”⁵ Gary Samore, President Obama’s senior arms control and nonproliferation adviser, essentially agrees, observing, “It may be that the current leadership in Iran is so committed to developing a nuclear weapons capability that all of the offers of engagement and all the threats of pressure and sanction simply may not be enough.”⁶

If there is a consensus that sanctions ultimately will fail, there is an equally strong belief among the

foreign-policy establishment in Washington and other Western capitals that preemptive military action is unappealing. Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, frames the conundrum, saying either an Iranian bomb or an attack on Iran would be “a calamity, a disaster.” Even if Tehran neither used nor threatened directly to use a nuclear weapon, its possession of nuclear weapons would boost its regional ambitions and hegemonic designs. Other regional powers would be tempted to acquire their own nuclear capabilities, igniting an arms race among unstable states. A preemptive strike—no matter how successful—is likely to be only the first shot in a war in a volatile region that supplies much of the developed world’s energy resources. Thus Brzezinski and many others argue that the least-bad choice is “containment,” or, as Cronin terms it, “comprehensive containment.”⁷

An undeniable attraction of a containment policy is that it worked during the Cold War in the face of a truly existential Soviet threat. “There is reason to think we can manage a nuclear Iran,” MIT’s Barry Posen wrote in the *New York Times*:

The fear is that Iran could rely on a diffuse threat to deter others from attacking it, even in response to Iranian belligerence. But while it’s possible that Iranian leaders would think this way, it’s equally possible they would be more cautious. Tehran could not rule out the possibility that others with more and better nuclear weapons would strike Iran first, should it provoke a crisis or war. Judging from Cold War history, if the Iranians so much as appeared to be readying their nuclear forces for use, the United States might consider a preemptive strike.⁸

Christopher Layne, like Posen another member of the so-called realist school, concedes that while “a nuclear-armed Iran is not a pleasant prospect, neither is it an intolerable one. . . . The United States has adjusted to similar situations in the past and can do so this time.”⁹

James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh are perhaps the most notable recent advocates of a policy of containing Iran. Their *Foreign Affairs* article, “After Iran Gets the Bomb: Containment and Its Implications,” carefully weighs the pros and cons of such a policy. Takeyh served briefly as an aide to Dennis Ross, then–State Department special adviser for the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia, who also counsels containment. While Lindsay and Takeyh acknowledge that “containing a nuclear Iran would not be easy,” they conclude that the alternatives are worse and that an Iranian nuclear capability is not unacceptable and may represent an opportunity:

Containment could buy Washington time to persuade the Iranian ruling class that the revisionist game it has been playing is simply not worth the candle. Thus, even as Washington pushes to counter Iran, it should be open to the possibility that Tehran’s calculations might change. To press Tehran in the right direction, Washington should signal that it seeks to create an order in the Middle East that is peaceful and self-sustaining. The United States will remain part of the region’s security architecture for the foreseeable future. But it need not maintain an antagonistic posture toward Iran. An Islamic Republic that abandoned its nuclear ambitions, accepted prevailing international norms, and respected the sovereignty of its neighbors would discover that the United States is willing to work with, rather than against, Iran’s legitimate national aspirations.¹⁰

Even while acknowledging that Iran poses a qualitatively different threat than did the Soviet Union, Lindsay and Takeyh also extend the underlying Cold War analogue in arguing that military “deterrence would by necessity be the cornerstone of a U.S. strategy to contain a nuclear Iran.” They further recognize that, though this ultimately was a winning approach in the Cold War, deterrence can fail and nearly did so during the Cuban missile crisis and at several other junctures:

Iran’s revisionist aims and paranoia about U.S. power may appear to make the country uniquely difficult to deter. But that conclusion conveniently—and mistakenly—recasts the history of U.S. confrontations with emerging nuclear powers in a gentler light than is deserved. At the start of the Cold War, U.S. officials hardly saw the Soviet Union as a status quo power. In the 1960s, China looked like the ultimate rogue regime: it had intervened in Korea and gone to war with India, and it repressed its own people. Mao boasted that although nuclear war might kill half the world’s population, it would also mean that “imperialism would be razed to the ground and the whole world would become socialist.”¹¹

In sum, should sanctions and negotiations fail to dissuade Iran from fulfilling its nuclear ambitions, some consider containment an increasingly acceptable alternative to military action. We agree that escalated confrontation with Iran—and there is undeniably, a low-level war already being waged by Iranian operatives or proxies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—would throw an already volatile region into chaos, perhaps spread and involve other great powers, and place a heavy burden on overstretched American forces and finances. The costs of war are all too obvious and painfully familiar.

Purposes, Presumptions, and Processes

Containment is hardly a cost-free policy. Substantial research exploring the nature of and prospects for biting sanctions designed to dissuade Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons already exists. Research institutions and various militaries and intelligence agencies have repeatedly gamed military options. Others have examined ways and means to aid and influence the Iranian opposition. Beyond the kind of policy sketches of the sort offered by a number of sources—including the 2008 Bipartisan Policy Center report;¹² the Lindsay and Takeyh article; and a rebutting *Foreign Affairs* article by Eric Edelman, Andrew Krepinevich, and Evan Montgomery¹³—little thought has gone into what an effective containment and deterrent regime will require of the United States and its allies.

This paper is the product of an American Enterprise Institute project designed to examine the challenges of containment and the costs of deterrence. We agree with containment proponents that the successes of the Cold War policy provide a framework for thinking about the difficulties of a nuclear Iran, even allowing for the unique circumstances of the two situations and the different and unique ideologies embraced by both adversaries. However, we feel that a deeper examination of the original Cold War policy choices is necessary. Similarly, the immense corpus of Cold War deterrence literature provided a resource that other studies have not fully mined. We seek to extract enduring principles or structures of deterrence as a way to assess the prospects for deterring a nuclear Iran. Further, we understand strategy making as a way to achieve US policy goals and therefore find that any worthwhile assessment of

deterrence requires thinking about the US side of the equation. Finally, though a thorough appraisal of the military requirements for deterrence would demand more detailed analysis than resources allow, we offer some broad outlines of capabilities and force levels.

These assessments required that we make some presumptions and projections about the nature and scope of Iranian nuclear capabilities, as well as its other military powers and its asymmetric potential. Current debates tend to focus too narrowly on questions such as when Iran will break out, whether Tehran will declare a nuclear capability or embrace ambiguity, or whether it will test a weapon. For the sake of this study, we presumed that Iran would follow the traditional strategic logic of emerging nuclear powers, building an arsenal that would provide a minimum but robust deterrent and seeking to reduce any vulnerability to a preemptive strike. An evaluation of the prospects of containment and deterrence demands nothing less. US policy and strategy must take reasonable worst-case scenarios into account. Conversely, any effort at containment that cannot withstand such a stress test is a prescription for failure. As will be argued in fuller detail below, we ensure these presumptions are well within the realm of the possible of the current Iranian program. In particular, we assumed that Iran has acquired a nuclear-weapons capability and may have tested a device; Iran continues to advance its nuclear-weapons program and war-head-delivery systems; there has been no military intervention in Iran; and there has been no substantial change in form or composition of the government in Tehran.

The Meaning of Containment

The public discussion of Iran containment has been conducted in a haze of good feeling about the successes of the Cold War, but as Lindsay and Takeyh suggest, containing the Soviet challenge was hardly simple. As John Lewis Gaddis, perhaps the period's foremost historian, has written, the Cold War witnessed many different—and substantially varying—codes of containment. In the early 1980s, Gaddis had already identified five such codes; arguably Ronald Reagan formulated a sixth and George H. W. Bush, responding to the unanticipated break-up of the Soviet empire, formulated a seventh.¹⁴

The seeds of the Cold War containment policy were bred in George Kennan's seminal "Long Telegram" of 1946.¹⁵ The essence of this communiqué appeared as the "Mr. X" *Foreign Affairs* article in 1947; its title, "Sources of Soviet Conduct," indicated that at the core of Kennan's insight was an analysis of Soviet strategic culture, that is, the ingrained habits and patterns of Soviet strategic behavior. As the telegram stated, the "party line is not based on any objective analysis of [the] situation beyond Russia's borders. . . . It arises mainly from basic inner-Russian necessities which existed before [World War II] and exist today."¹⁶ The question of the fundamental, ingrained nature of the Iranian regime, as will be developed at length below, is key for any policy of Iran containment.

And although Kennan would later complain about the militarization of containment, he did admit from the first that the underlying balance of military power was key to his policy recommendation. The strength of US armed forces, he wrote, "is probably the most important single instrumentality in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy."¹⁷ Other "instrumentalities"—diplomacy, economic policy, and what we today would term elements of soft

power—were also important tools, but credible military deterrence proved to be the one necessary, if not sufficient, means of containment.

Kennan understood that what would become the Cold War, though a bipolar geopolitical competition, was not simply a binary equation. His underlying insights provide enduring guidance in considering how to contain Iran. For example, Kennan wrote, the United States would need to defend vulnerable allies, especially in a Europe devastated by World War II. Containment required the "strengthening of the natural forces of resistance within the respective countries which the communists are attacking." Nevertheless, in the end there was a natural limit to Soviet expansionism. "The Kremlin leaders are so inconsiderate, so relentless, so overbearing and so cynical in the discipline they impose on their followers that few can stand their authority for long," he wrote. It has similarly proved that, for Iran's neighbors and even for Iranian minorities, familiarity with Persian leaders has bred contempt. Kennan did not see containment as a passive posture, but rather made a case for comprehensive counter pressure. He argued that it is "the way you marshal all the forces at your disposal on the world chessboard. I mean not only the military force you have . . . but all the political forces."¹⁸

Kennan's principles were not codified—that is, they did not amount to a practical strategy—until the Truman administration. This began with the articulation of a Truman Doctrine, the president's March 12, 1947, speech to Congress, and, prior to the Korean War, the drafting of National Security Council (NSC) report 68.¹⁹ More than analyzing the sources of Soviet conduct, President Truman described a policy rooted in American political principles, saying, "I believe it must be the policy of the

United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.”²⁰ The NSC document also settled an ongoing debate about the strategy behind containment. Some had advocated a “strongpoint” strategy, hoping to retain the strategic initiative and limit the costs of containment by concentrating on solely critical points of confrontation such as Western Europe, but Truman decided in favor of a perimeter approach. As NSC 68 put it, “The assault on free institutions is worldwide now, and in the context of the present polarization of power a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere.”²¹ Finally, the Truman administration concluded that while the Soviet empire might ultimately collapse of its own internal contradictions, “without superior aggregate military strength, in being and readily mobilizable, a policy of ‘containment’. . . is no more than a policy of bluff.”²²

As Gaddis observed, however, subsequent administrations operationalized this basic policy in a number of ways; there were multiple strategies for achieving the goals of containment. Indeed, the pendulum could be said to have swung between two poles: one meant to limit costs and narrow the strategic focus and the other, originating with Truman, more expansive and more expensive. The Eisenhower New Look strategy, with its emphasis on massive nuclear response and the *détente* strategy of the Nixon-Carter years reflected the narrow pole; Truman, the Kennedy-era strategy of flexible response and the Reagan rollback approach to Soviet client states embodied the more expansive pole. Nonetheless, the underlying policy remained remarkably consistent:

[1] block further expansion of Soviet power,
[2] expose the falsities of Soviet pretensions,
[3] induce a retraction of the Kremlin’s control and influence and [4] in general, so foster the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system that the Kremlin is brought at least to the point of modifying its behavior to conform to generally accepted international standards.²³

Likewise, we have taken these to be essential components of a coherent Iran containment policy: that it should seek to block any Iranian expansion in the Persian Gulf region; to illuminate the problematic nature of the regime’s ambitions; to constrain and indeed to induce a retraction of Iranian influence, including Iranian soft power; and to work toward a political transformation, if not a physical transformation, of the Tehran regime.

A further essential characteristic of Cold War containment applicable to Iran is that such a policy demands a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach driven by consistent diplomacy. Containing Iran requires effecting the isolation of the Iranian regime, disconnecting it from great power patrons, limiting its ability to peel off neighbors and regional players to serve its agenda, limiting its use of proxies, and more. Particularly because the shock value of an Iranian nuclear breakthrough will diminish over time, a prime task for diplomats will be to ensure that the global coalition now in place is not divided and that no party seeks to make a separate peace. Because the world today is more multipolar than it was when the Soviet Union was the chief adversary, preventing any separate peace will be more difficult.

The isolation of Iran should not be intended as a punishment *per se* for nuclear transgressions, but rather as a means of limiting Iranian exploitation of its newfound status as a nuclear power. Much as the United States ultimately sought to encircle the Soviet space via the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and organizations of like-minded nations, the US government will need to build and institutionalize coalitions to box Iran in and to deny it the opportunity to project power.

A strong United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution that authorizes the various measures necessary to underpin any global containment regime will be easier to achieve if the Islamic Republic’s break with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty is overt and it declares that it is in possession of nuclear weapons. Parts of such a regime are already in place, but the history of UN-mandated sanctions

regimes (Libya, Iraq, Iran, and Bosnia) is that they are flouted with little consequence and they erode quickly over time.

What diplomatic pieces are required to successfully contain Iran?

- **Global isolation of the regime.** Iran's strategy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution has been to divide and conquer the international community, seeking to pit centers of power (the United States, European Union, Russia, China) against each other. Diminishing the benefits Iran would derive by going nuclear will require limiting Tehran's ability to divide and conquer and preventing Tehran's integration into the international community as a nuclear state.
- **Regional encirclement.** The government of the Islamic Republic has repeatedly made clear that it views itself as the natural leader of the Middle East, calling the shots not only in the Persian Gulf region but also in the Levant. "The Persian Gulf has always, is and shall always belong to Iran," Iranian military chief of staff General Hassan Firouzabadi said in early 2011.²⁴ It has sought to insert itself into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and sponsored Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon.²⁵ Both Egypt and Jordan have accused Iran of seeking to interfere in their domestic affairs.²⁶ Indeed, Iran's willingness to play a regional role is clear from its willingness—at least publicly—to criticize the regime of Syria's embattled president, Bashar al Assad.²⁷ Iran has sought to destabilize Iraq, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait internally to its own advantage; to dominate the waterways of the Shatt al Arab and the Persian Gulf; and to shut out US influence where possible.²⁸ The Islamic Republic has also embraced a soft-power strategy throughout the region by funding development, education, bricks and mortar, electrical grids, and more to tie countries more closely to Persian influence.²⁹ Nuclear weapons will add to Iran's persuasion as these efforts continue and will require substantial diplomatic counterbalancing. In addition, the costs of enhanced US and allied military presence that containment will demand will necessitate heavy diplomatic lift to counteract the likely reaction from not only Iranian proxies but also other groups, such as al Qaeda. Indeed, Osama bin Laden's main preoccupation in his first years after founding al Qaeda was the expulsion of American troops from Saudi Arabia.³⁰
- **Building strategic alliances in the context of Iranian interests.** Iran has effectively exploited key economic relationships to undermine existing sanctions regimes. The United States has countered with secondary sanctions to reduce incentives to conduct business with Iran, but much more will be needed. Among democratic nations, India continues to trade with the Islamic Republic despite growing international pressure. South Korea and Japan have also resisted efforts to isolate the regime even as its behavior has worsened. Their behavior highlights the need for further coalition building, substitution of other providers for goods Iran offers, and to strengthen incentives to work with the international community. Efforts to address these countries' interests and wrap them into regional constructs will build credibility. In the case of Iran, Turkey presents a special challenge. While Turkey is a key partner in NATO, its Islamist government has sought to reposition itself as an independent heavyweight if not a regional hegemon. How this will play out vis-à-vis Iran is difficult to predict. Ultimately, many

predict that Turkey's neo-Ottoman ambitions will clash with Iran's Shia revolutionary aims. It will require major diplomatic investment to ensure Turkey remains a responsible member of the Atlantic alliance and an important element in containing Iran.

- **Undermining the global network of malign actors.** Iran has successfully built a network of international pariahs and rejectionists to bolster its diplomatic defenses. Syria, Venezuela, Belarus, and Brazil have thrown their votes at the UN to protect Iran from the consequences of its own actions. Despite this pattern, few efforts have been made to isolate or co-opt Iran's partners. This is a major lacuna in US foreign policy and a *sine qua non* of any successful containment strategy. If Iran is to be cut from the web of the civilized world in the wake of going nuclear, it cannot be offered a backdoor for reentry. These nations will require a strategy to address the role that they play in cushioning Iran from international opprobrium. The same can be said for Iran's substate proxies, particularly groups that straddle the line between politics and terrorism such as Hamas and Hezbollah. The United States has made efforts to persuade its allies that these groups play a dangerous role in the Middle East and to cut such groups off from recognition and assistance. Such efforts will require a redoubling to prevent these groups from being strengthened—not just militarily—by a nuclear Iran.
- **Sever Iran from great power patrons.** Russia and China have consistently been willing to front for Iran in the United Nations and other international forums. Though some of Iran's recent actions—particularly revelations that it had constructed

a secret nuclear facility near Qom—have alienated Moscow and Beijing to a certain extent, the two are likely to seek rapid rapprochement with Iran subsequent to its acquisition of nuclear weapons. Just as the loss of Russian patronage was a blow to Tehran, recouping Russian support will also be high on the regime's list of priorities. Diplomatic efforts to maintain Russian and Chinese solidarity in a coalition to isolate nuclear Iran will be key but costly. Both states are mercantilist in their approaches and have economic and strategic rationales for resuscitating ties with Iran quickly. Russia has long watered down international efforts to sanction Iran to protect its own nuclear and arms trade, and China may well demand concessions on North Korea in exchange for solidarity on Iran.

- **Encourage a unified European Union (EU) strategy for Iran.** The European Union has historically been reluctant to work in concert on foreign-policy matters, particularly in such contentious areas as Iran. Success on the questions of Libya and Syria may encourage greater future cooperation, but the issue has been sufficiently debated that observers might suspect the EU's divergent positions are rigid. At various times, Italy, Greece, and Sweden have undermined EU efforts to maintain a united front. Indeed, more than Russian or Chinese wobbliness, a failure by Europe to stand firm in containing Iran will be a major flaw in any effort.

Diplomacy and sanctions are best thought of as the point of departure for a successful containment policy toward Iran, but these are not the only steps. Even if economic isolation does not dissuade the Iranian regime from acquiring a nuclear arsenal, the economic isolation of a nuclear Iran would be an essential element for after-the-fact containment.

Certainly there ought to be no reward in the form of lessened economic isolation should Iran go nuclear. Some form of economic sanctions has been in place against Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Since 1995, executive orders and US law have progressively tightened the economic noose around the Iranian leadership, largely with the aim of bringing Iran to the negotiating table to give up its nuclear-weapons program. An Iran with nuclear weapons is an Iran against which sanctions will have failed. Nonetheless, sanctions will be a vital part of any containment regime, and the financial, trade, energy, and other sanctions currently in place can be expected to remain—with efforts needed to expand, invigorate, and maintain them over time. Similarly, it will be important to deny Iran access to capital from investment and trade and to limit the ability of Iranian officials and business leaders to trawl for support around the world.

Beyond diplomacy and sanctions, containing a nuclear Iran would require increased efforts on other fronts, including:

- **Competing with and disrupting Iranian regional and global economic strategy** (see pages 11–12).
- **Working with allies inside the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to diminish Iranian influence in energy markets.** This is a tall order, as the chambers of OPEC have hitherto been almost sacrosanct. However, there are myriad examples of politically motivated manipulation of the market, including Saudi efforts to balance prices in response to both Iranian and Iraqi threats, as well as Gulf efforts to incentivize both Russia and China to corral Iran. Iran is an important oil supplier, and revenues from oil sales are the Islamic Republic's lifeline. Cutting it will be key.
- **Supporting effective opposition groups.** While this policy has long existed in name, effecting a genuine policy toward the Iranian opposition will become more urgent once Iran possesses nuclear weapons. Identifying organized opposition groups, ensuring they are not connected to any terrorist organization, and finding usable channels to provide useful assistance is no small challenge. Independent and indigenous labor unions present a special opportunity, as do human rights and civil-society groups. Meaningful support—economic, political, and moral—to groups like Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland has historically been instrumental in chipping away at authoritarian regimes and, ultimately, in toppling them from power. Once identified, such groups might receive financial and diplomatic support, if they are willing. The US government should not be overly concerned that the regime will seek to taint groups receiving foreign funding as disloyal, because the regime hurls such accusations about any and all opponents, regardless of their financing sources.
- **Conducting information operations and public diplomacy.** This effort requires a multidirectional approach, but is a key element in any effective containment regime. Exposing the Islamic Republic's falsities demands international effort as well as effort within Iran. It also requires facilitating information flow into and out of the country better, something the United States has yet to master despite major investments in surrogate radio and Voice of America.
- **Promoting human rights.** The promotion of human rights has been a hallmark of US foreign policy. However, both during and after the Cold War, human rights issues have too often taken a back seat to other policy priorities. Nonetheless, the

use of the issue as a *casus belli* in operations against Libya may have infused it with newfound international credibility. The human rights issue proved an enormously effective wedge issue during the Cold War and can again play a role in delegitimizing the Iranian regime in world opinion.

- **Controlling the movement of regime leaders.** The Iranian regime exploits the willingness of the international community to explore engagement—economic or political—and avails itself of generous access to the outside world. It shows no

such generosity in extending visas to foreigners. Information and access to alternative viewpoints will strengthen the hand of the Iranian public vis-à-vis the leadership. Imposing visa parity is a possible way to crowbar Iranian doors open, or at the least to constrain efforts by Iranian leaders to further their influence.

As Cold War precedent reveals—and as many advocates of containing Iran acknowledge—the keystone of any containment policy is a military strategy of deterrence. Absent a credible deterrent posture, the United States risks Iran calling its bluff.

Structures of Deterrence

As with the broader policy of containment, the vast literature of Cold War deterrence provides a useful framework for thinking about deterring a nuclear Iran. The nature of the Iranian regime is much different than the Soviet regime, and the extent of Iranian power is a fraction of Soviet power, but while the particular circumstances may be unique, there are structural similarities.

What is deterrence? In a classic 1983 study, John Mearsheimer defined it broadly as “persuading an opponent not to initiate a specific action because the perceived benefits do not justify the estimated costs and risks.”³¹ A decade later, Paul Huth, Christopher Gelpi, and D. Scott Bennett adopted a similar definition: deterrence is a “policy that seeks to persuade an adversary, through the threat of military retaliation, that the costs of using military force will outweigh the benefits.”³² Samuel Huntington observed that retaliatory or preemptive capabilities were useful in creating offensive or counteroffensive military options even within a defensive strategic posture.³³ This also brings forth the distinction between deterrence based upon denial and deterrence by threat of punishment. Indeed, the original US Cold War strategy embraced both means of deterrence, as Dean Acheson wrote in *Power and Diplomacy*:

We mean that the only deterrent to the imposition of Russian will in Western Europe is the belief that from the outset of any such attempt American power would be employed in stopping it, and if necessary, would inflict on the Soviet Union injury which the Moscow regime would not wish to suffer.³⁴

As the size of the Soviet nuclear arsenal grew and the costs of a nuclear exchange, even if it seemed to

achieve its military objectives, grew intolerable, late in the Cold War deterrence came to be synonymous with denial. Yet it is worth recovering these important nuances in thinking about deterring Iran. If nothing else, deterrence by threat of punishment is a more economical approach to employing military force than deterrence by denial.

What is common to these traditional definitions is that deterrence is seen as a subjective measure: its value can be understood only in terms of the state of mind it creates in the mind of an adversary. The adversary must be *persuaded*. *Estimated* costs must outweigh *perceived* benefits. Thus the military bean count—the objective reckoning of the correlation of forces—is only a part of the deterrence equation. Likewise the operational calculus, the likely performance of forces in combat that includes not just the capabilities of their weaponry but the training, doctrine, and other less-tangible military capacities of the forces, is not fully determinative of any deterrent effect. Nonmilitary factors have an equal, if not greater, weight. Thus Mearsheimer refines his definition:

Decision makers might well assess the probable reaction of allies and adversaries, aspects of international law and possible reaction in a forum such as the United Nations, the likely effect upon the economy. In short, deterrence broadly defined is ultimately a function of the relationship between the perceived political benefits resulting from military action and a number of nonmilitary as well as military costs and risks.³⁵

Even this expanded definition does not deal directly with domestic political calculations, which often are the most powerful determinants of all

involved. These domestic variables also call into question another basic tenet of deterrence theory as practiced during the Cold War: that states are unitary rational actors—that is, that national decision making is generally coherent (unitary) and motivated by comprehensible calculations of risk and reward (rational). Although there was a school that recognized a distinct Russian or Soviet strategic culture (and even, occasionally, a glimmering that the United States viewed the world through a unique set of lenses produced by its principles and its history), more frequently it was assumed that both sides operated from a clear understanding of material national interest. Indeed, much US policy proceeded from the premise that Americans might better appreciate Soviet interests than the Russians themselves. Despite the effort put into “Kremlinology”—charting the rise and fall of individuals and factions within the bureaucracy—there was an analogous premise that when a Soviet premier spoke or negotiated seriously, he acted in the name of the state. Both these assumptions remain deeply entrenched in the views of the US policymaking establishment. Brzezinski’s argument for containing Iran allowed that Iranians “may be dangerous, assertive, and duplicitous, but there is nothing in their history to suggest they are suicidal.”³⁶

Surveying the political science literature of the Cold War years suggests eight general questions that frame the calculation of deterrence.³⁷

- **The Polarity Question.** Where do the two (or more) parties stand in the constellation of the international system? Current conventional wisdom is that the post–Cold War “unipolar moment” of US dominance is coming to its conclusion.³⁸ Two trends point in this direction: the rise of new great powers with global interests and the perceived withering of the state in light of increased globalization. Despite these broad trends, for the purposes of assessing the policy of Iran containment, the United States still should be regarded

as the principal architect of international security while Iran’s overall standing is that of a relatively weak regional power.

- **The Interest Question.** What are the two sides’ relative strategic interests? Past literature is likewise only partially useful in assessing the scope of relative interests in the twenty-first century. Political science has posited a strong correlation between the strength of the national interests at risk in a dispute or the proximity of the battlefield with the willingness to accept risk. However, there is a strong tendency to reify strategic interests, whereas a more important question may be how each side perceives its interests, including its ideological interests. In general terms, we assume that the United States will conceive its Iran policies in light of its global strategy and its long-standing commitment to securing a favorable balance of power in the Persian Gulf region. Conversely, we see Iran’s nuclear ambitions as an expression of its desire to establish a very different balance of power that suits its geopolitical and ideological interests. That is, the behavior of both the United States and Iran—their own assessments of their interests—will be shaped to some degree by fundamental beliefs about the nature of a just international order.
- **The Involvement Question.** How do the two sides’ roles in other conflicts or confrontations affect the prospects for deterrence? The professional literature asserts that when challengers are involved in a third-party dispute, they are less likely to take additional risks or escalate conflicts; conversely, if the challenger sees that a defender is occupied elsewhere, this will appear as an opportunity to exploit. Answering this question in the context of

Iran deterrence will be a delicate calculation. Both the United States and Iran already have many intertwined involvements throughout the Persian Gulf region and beyond. The United States in particular has a long habit of multiple involvements in disparate regions. In recent years, Iran has been active globally, courting a variety of partners, including some—like Venezuela—in South America. In sum, both Iran and the United States are involved with many third parties, simultaneously defending and challenging each other's interests. Answering the involvement question will be a complex assessment.

- **The Risk Question.** Are the parties likely to be risk averse or willing to run risks? There are two elements to the risk question: one is structural, reflecting the nature of the international system, and the other is cultural, reflecting the nature of the competing states. A multipolar system is not only inherently less stable, but also creates opportunities for risk takers. As the number of actors in the international system rises—states, coalitions of states, or even nonstate actors—it often becomes harder to predict or to calculate the likely outcome of a conflict or the behavior of the larger number of actors. The character of states and actors tends to become more pronounced: risk takers become bolder while status-quo, risk-averse states become more cautious. In a multipolar world, risk takers see greater opportunities and more likely rewards while the risk averse feel more constrained and more at risk. Thus the strategic culture question takes on increased importance. The nature of the competing regimes is given greater play.
- **The Dispute-Behavior Question.** How does each party's behavior in recent conflicts

and the perceptions of that behavior add or detract from deterrence? In addition to the structural question of risk taking within the international system, there is the question of each party's track record, that is, its actual and perceived exercise of political willpower. Deterrence literature concludes, not surprisingly, that backing down in a public dispute increases an adversary's propensity to assume risks. Both the Bush and Obama administrations have expressed the importance of preserving the global and regional perception of the United States as the guarantor of Persian Gulf security. Conversely, Iran has been unable or unwilling to act overtly to protect its proxies, such as during the Israeli incursion in Lebanon against Hezbollah in 2006, in response to the Israeli strike on Syria's nuclear facilities in 2007, or during the 2011 Syrian popular rebellion.

- **The Nuclear Question.** How does either party's nuclear capability affect the question of conventional-force deterrence? One of the key issues in considering this question is assessing each side's second-strike capability, about which an enormous amount of ink was spilled over the course of the Cold War. While we have sidestepped this question to a degree in the course of this study's assumptions, we do so as a result of the conclusion that any US deterrence strategy must take such capabilities into account to succeed. We will also consider Iran's prospects for creating such a capability.
- **The Conventional Forces Order-of-Battle Question.** What are the nonnuclear military capabilities that the two parties might bring to bear in a crisis or conflict? Assessing nonnuclear military balances is inevitably an imprecise calculation, even when, as in the Cold War, there was a well-

established body of knowledge not only about the Red Army order of battle but also about Soviet military doctrine and readiness. As will become apparent, assessing Iran's nonnuclear military capacity is a more difficult task. Do the activities of Iranian or Iranian-backed special groups in Iraq count? What about Hezbollah in Lebanon? Is Assad's Syria, at least for some purposes, a de facto Iranian proxy? The current military balance involves many more asymmetries of capability, and once again, the Cold War experience does not necessarily serve us well. Nevertheless, it is generally true that the more favorable the military balance or, more precisely, the more favorable the *perception* of the military balance is to the challenger, the more difficult the task of deterrence. Finally, this precept needs to be applied narrowly and precisely relative to the challenger's object. Iran may well view itself as generally weak in regard to the United States, but it might easily regard the situation in the region as generally favorable. For example, deterring Iran from interfering in Iraq thus far has proved impossible.

- **The Strategic-Culture Question.** How do larger and longer-term international self-perceptions, traditions, and patterns of behavior shape the deterrence equation? The key idea behind the notion of strategic culture is that a country—or any actor on the international stage—defines its security goals and strategy in a way that reflects its political culture. Political culture is a constant that has a measurable effect on the ways in which decisions are made and wars are waged. Alastair Iain Johnston's summary definition of strategic culture is plain: "Those who use it tend to mean that there are consistent and persistent historical patterns in the way particular states think about the use of force for political ends."³⁹ Conversely, two different states facing roughly similar challenges of international politics or security might well act in entirely different ways, reflecting different strategic cultures. We regard this question to be of critical importance in assessing the prospects for deterring a nuclear-armed Iran.

Assessing the Prospects for Deterrence

The United States has been practicing a loose form of deterrence against Iran for the better part of three decades, since the revolutionaries inspired by Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini seized the US embassy in Tehran and held fifty-two diplomats hostage for 444 days. Yet the range of possible conflict points has mushroomed. What might be called the canonical military threat from Iran—the closing of the Strait of Hormuz, a choke-point through which approximately 17 percent of the world's crude oil passes⁴⁰—remains a serious concern, as do a variety of direct Iranian threats such as regular harassment of US shipping by Iranian small boats. Further, the dangers of Iranian irregular combatants or proxies are a critical and possibly existential worry to America's newest allies in the region: Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran's Hezbollah proxy in Lebanon wages an ebb-and-flow war against Israel, a conflict that broke into large-scale conventional operations in summer 2006. Now the shadow of Iran's nuclear program casts a pall from the Persian Gulf to Europe to Central and South Asia.

A central question for a strategy of deterrence is what individual leaders, groups of leaders, and Iranian institutions are the objects and targets of deterrence. Deterrence is psychological, a calculation that the perceived costs of aggression outweigh the perceived benefits. Iran's diffuse leadership structures make the job of deterrence extremely challenging. Constant domestic power struggles within the regime make deterrence even more difficult.

Obviously, the first object of a US deterrence strategy for a nuclear Iran would be to prevent not only the regime's use of nuclear weapons but also conventional attacks it might feel capable of executing because it possesses nuclear weapons. Nuclear proliferation from Iran to others is another concern.

Even without a nuclear weapon of its own, Iran is difficult to deter. The current, de facto deterrence regime does not prevent Iran from isolated acts of military aggression or from aggression by Iranian proxies or partners. A more thorough assessment of the traditional questions of deterrence suggests the magnitude of the task.

The Polarity Question

For all of Iran's frightening potential nuclear, conventional, and irregular military capacities and its great potential oil wealth, the bilateral balance of power between the United States and Iran pits the world's sole superpower against, at best, an aspiring regional hegemon. Even within its immediate region, Iran's quest for dominance in modern times has been offset by Iraq—either singly or as the champion of Arab states along the Persian Gulf—and by Israel. From outside, Iran has been subject not only to US but also British, Russian, and Central Asian interventions. Historically, Iran is a surrounded state; it faces potential adversaries at every point of the compass. If the United States succeeds in building lasting partnerships with Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran will find itself with very few appealing geostrategic options. Indeed, we can already see this dynamic at work in Iran's attempts to cultivate great-power sponsors: first China, then Russia, but also, with limited success, India. As Washington Institute for Near East Policy scholars Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt have observed:

Iran is in a fundamentally weak position that has been temporarily masked by a combination of circumstances favorable to the Islamic

Republic. Iran's revolutionaries were riding high in 2006 with oil prices up, friendly forces doing well from Lebanon to Iraq, the United States bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and domestic opponents scattered. But the longer the nuclear crisis continues, the more apparent Iran's profound problems will become to the country's leaders.⁴¹

Deterrence also requires considering how the Islamic Republic stands within the constellation of Muslim states, for the mullahs in Iran lead a regime that has one eye on the earthly order but a second eye on heaven. A fully nuanced discussion of the role of faith and religion in motivating Iranian behavior is beyond the scope of this paper, but religious ideology shapes Iranian decision making and must inform any US attempt to deter Iran. Iran styles itself as the leader of Shia communities against repression from the majority Sunnis and their governments. The Iranian city of Qom and the more prominent Iraqi city of Najaf have long contended for primacy among Shia Muslims. To the degree that there is a modern Shia awakening, the Iranian religious leadership must try to shape this popular movement to its purposes.⁴²

At the same time, the Muslim world and Arab states in particular are entering a period of profound political change. The Arab Spring creates both challenges and opportunities for Tehran, and there is no consensus among experts about the effect. But Marc Lynch accurately sums the underlying power dynamics:

There is little sign of any regional bandwagoning with Iran today among either regimes or newly empowered publics. Indeed, Iran's push for a nuclear weapon and regional influence has alarmed the regimes of the Gulf. Arab regimes have chosen to balance against Iran rather than join it in a challenge to U.S. policy, and are deeply fearful of Iranian power. They have moved closer to the United States and to Israel out of fear of Iranian power, and have been increasingly active in their efforts

against Iran. They have also intensified their military relations with the United States, including massive arms purchases and military cooperation. These leaders fear that American engagement with Iran will come at their expense, and are as worried about abandonment as they are to exposure to Iranian retaliation.⁴³

The net effect of changes across the region is to introduce uncertainty about the balance of power for all actors, not just Iran but also the United States and the Arab regimes of the region. Since deterrence involves a multisided assessment of risks and rewards, the effect of the Arab Spring is to multiply the opportunities for miscalculation.

The Interest Question

Evaluating Iran's strategic interests and priorities is, perhaps, the central question to understand the prospects for deterring a nuclear Iran. At minimum, Iran's primary strategic interest is to guarantee regime stability and survival. Tehran regards US presence in the Persian Gulf as a threat, a perception heightened by American presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, Iran's interests are more expansive and transcend the Islamic Revolution. If Tehran had its way, it would not only control the waterways in and around the Persian Gulf but also have a favorable balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean and Arabian Peninsula. It would like protection to the east, where it considers itself guardian to coethnicists and coreligionists in Afghanistan, and to the north into the southern Caucasus. Tehran views itself as a panregional and not just a regional power.⁴⁴ The Persians' sense of their historical role and cultural superiority reinforces Iran's sense that by right it deserves to be a regional hegemon. (See map 1 on page 48.)

This will remain the case regardless of who is running Iran. The current internal power struggle—not just pitting reformists against principalists, but

also pitting hardliners against other hardliners—is not about the scope of Iran’s power. Regardless of who ends up on top—Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or his clerical successors, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), or any other power center or faction—Iranian leaders will feel they have predominant right within what they consider to be their own near abroad.

This clashes with US strategic interests. Indeed, the long-time view among the Washington establishment that Tehran is the United States’ natural partner in the region does not withstand serious scrutiny.⁴⁵ Washington has long considered the rise of a hostile hegemon in the world’s most critical energy-producing region to be unacceptable. The US commitment is only increasing, both because of the partnerships with Iraq and Afghanistan and because of the global importance of energy supplies. Both Iran and the United States are engaged on multiple fronts, not only with each other or with allies but also globally. The Iranian regime has cultivated ties with Latin American and African leaders, including Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal.⁴⁶ Iran and Venezuela’s promise in October 2010 to establish a “new world order” that would “eliminate Western dominance over global affairs,” may pose more of a rhetorical than an existential threat to the Monroe Doctrine,⁴⁷ but these Iranian inroads show that US and Iranian policies, not only in the Persian Gulf region but beyond, will continue to remain at odds.

The Arab Spring underscores the divergent interests of the United States and Iran, and it introduces new uncertainties to their strategic landscapes. Iran is struggling to reclaim its self-styled position as the leader of a regional resistance movement, but it is now marketing it as one primarily focused against Israeli and US influence. As Supreme Leader Khamenei stated, “One can clearly tell that the principles of the current revolutions in the region . . . [are] resistance against the influence and domination of the United States and Europe that have wreaked the greatest damage and humiliation on the peoples

of these countries over the past two hundred years, [and] countering the usurper and fictitious Zionist regime.”⁴⁸ Iran has exploited the moment in Bahrain, but it has also seen its longtime ally Syria shaken by strong protests. Likewise, the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt has forced the United States to seek novel ways to define what had been one of its longest-standing strategic partnerships.

The Involvement Question

Traditionally, political scientists have framed the involvement question as an element that tends to distract parties, to divide their strategic attention, and to compete for the time and energy of senior decision makers and the bureaucracy. However, in the context of an increasingly global international system—and, even more so, in regard to the Persian Gulf region or the greater Middle East—multiple levels and kinds of involvement and interaction are simply a fact of life. In the case of a nuclear Iran and the United States, both sides will be involved in complex and interactive ways.

Since 1979, Iran has imagined itself as a revolutionary, ideological force in the Muslim world. Even as it has struggled with existential security issues—such as Saddam Hussein’s invasion—it has had continuous global geopolitical and economic involvements with European great powers, India, and China. In recent years, and often through the mechanism of the IRGC, Iran has expanded its international contacts, for example in Latin America and Africa.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, for Iran, domestic and regional issues are dominant, particularly to maintain the legitimacy of the regime (even as the military contests with the clerical leadership) and to maintain partnerships with Syria, Hezbollah, and others. Its focus is relatively narrow, though expanding.

At the same time, the unstable nature of its domestic politics, regional politics, and the uncertainties stemming from the Arab Spring make it plain that the Iranian leadership will have to juggle more balls at a faster pace. The internal power struggle of

the regime and the larger issue of domestic political unrest both pose existential first-order questions for the supreme leader, president, and top military leaders. Iran's leadership is at odds with itself and many of its people, particularly the younger generation.

Confusion regarding US policy also demands Tehran's strategic attention. After Iran rebuffed Obama's request for it to unclench its fist, the rhetoric emanating from Washington has become more bellicose. General Martin E. Dempsey, incoming chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned Iran during his Senate confirmation hearing that the pursuit of nuclear weapons or increased attacks in Iraq would be a "serious miscalculation."⁵⁰ Describing the Tehran regime as a "destabilizing force," Dempsey articulated what he saw as Iran's intent to seek a "Beirut-like moment"—a reference to the 1983 Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, Lebanon, and the subsequent withdrawal of US forces—to "send a message they have expelled us from Iraq."⁵¹ In Afghanistan, the prospect of a US drawdown and ultimate withdrawal would provide a similar incentive. NATO has, in fact, passed control of coalition operations in Herat City, the capital of Herat province in western Afghanistan where Iranian influence is strong, to Afghan forces.

Friction between the United States and Iran is not limited to ground wars. Since 2007, when Admiral Michael Mullen disclosed that the Iranian navy had given control of the Persian Gulf to the IRGC, US and Iranian naval forces have increasingly chafed against each other. Five small Iranian speedboats harassed US Navy ships in the Strait of Hormuz in January 2008. In two separate incidents four months later, US ships fired warning shots at Iranian patrol boats sailing to within 200 yards. In April 2010, an Iranian naval jet in the Gulf of Oman flew as low as 300 feet over the aircraft carrier USS *Eisenhower*. It is not likely naval tensions will subside. In response to a suggestion by Admiral Mullen that Tehran and Washington establish a hotline to avoid accidental escalation, Iran's defense minister rejected the idea outright, announcing instead that Iran was

mass producing a new missile designed to destroy warships, and the head of the IRGC navy similarly dismissed any such request, referring to the US presence in the Gulf as "illegitimate."⁵²

The political ferment in the Arab world provides both danger and opportunity that will occupy the minds of Iranian strategists. In Bahrain and among the Shia of Saudi Arabia's eastern province, Iran will be tempted to make common cause with traditionally oppressed peoples. The crisis in Syria forces Iran to aid (even as it condemns) what has been its most reliable state partner. The fortunes of Hezbollah and Lebanon remain constantly volatile. As if that were not enough, Tehran is also energetically reaching out to Turkey, hoping for a sympathetic ear from the leading Justice and Development (AK) party and making common cause against the Kurds, to Egypt, and to the two Palestinian factions.

As the world's primary security provider, the United States will inevitably be involved elsewhere for the foreseeable future. Some critics have even described the United States as being on the verge of strategic exhaustion. Indeed, two senior Obama administration officials wrote of "nine primary elements of the [world we inherit]: the costs of the Iraq War; military overextension; strategic preoccupation, confusion and distraction; disregard for the rule of law; softening power and alienated allies; public disillusionment; financial indebtedness; a divided and fearful policy; and the enduring promise and potential of America."⁵³ Broadly speaking, the administration has intended to reduce commitments in the Middle East while refocusing on global issues such as climate change or on other regions like East Asia. But it has been unable to carry out such a strategic repositioning. From the surge of forces in Afghanistan to the Libya war and the coming of the Arab Spring, Washington's engagement in the region has hardly diminished. Iran and the United States are more frequently in contact—engaged at cross purposes in more and more places and at moments of local political tumult. A fundamentally unstable relationship is increasingly being tested.

The Risk Question

Are Iran and its allies likely to be risk averse, or will they be willing to run risks? A 2001 Rand Corporation study interpreted Tehran's actions as an expression of prudent realism and observed that

Since the Islamic Republic's establishment, two factors—revolutionary Islam and Persian nationalism—have driven it into confrontation with its neighbors, with the superpowers, and with a host of governments in the Muslim and broader world. These two sources of adventurism are still strong today in Iran, particularly among key sectors of the elite.⁵⁴

There are two schools of thought regarding Iran's risk appetite. The first argues that Iran is increasingly pragmatic. For instance, a 2009 Rand Corporation report posited that although Iranian security decision making is fractured, its strategic calculations “usually trump ideology” and its decisions are a product of realpolitik thought.⁵⁵ According to this argument, Iran's support for its proxy groups, such as Hezbollah, appears “quite cynical and calculated.” The report finds that “Iran would not hesitate to barter or terminate its patronage if it perceived that the state's broader strategic aims would be better served. This dynamic is most evident in Tehran's May 2003 offer to the United States to effectively disarm Hezbollah.”⁵⁶

A second school of thought views Tehran's behavior, no matter how rooted in realpolitik calculations, as risk prone. Examples from Iran's internal dynamics and its dispute behavior support this view. In terms of domestic politics, two forces encourage risky behavior. First, the current regime's decision-making process lends it plausible deniability, which allows for adventurous foreign policy because the decision makers do not feel they can be held accountable for their actions. Through his commisars, who number in the hundreds if not thousands, Khamenei knows what debates are occurring and decides policy by decreeing what cannot be done.

By wielding veto power, the supreme leader sets policy but also ensures there is no smoking gun to indicate who ultimately made each decision. This kind of plausible deniability encourages risky behavior.⁵⁷ Not only do Iran's domestic politics enable it to take risks today, but the regime's increasing factions also make its risk taking more likely in the future. Factions are likely to make competing appeals to populist strains of nationalism to advance their domestic position while centralized policy making may prove more difficult.

There is also a wide range of expert opinion regarding President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who, rhetoric aside, may be a risk taker himself. In the ongoing power struggle between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei and between conservatives and reformists, some posit that it will be the collective leadership of the IRGC that ultimately emerges as the victor.⁵⁸ The IRGC has bureaucratic incentives to further its own policy and is already acting as both spoiler and provocateur. It is believed, for example, that the IRGC blocked Ahmadinejad's attempts after the 2009 election to improve relations with the United States. Each time Iran disregards a US red line with no consequence, the IRGC reinforces its belief that the United States is incapable of using or unwilling to use force.

Does Iran's behavior indicate that it will be willing to run risks? Tehran's reaction to the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq provides another indirect measure of the regime's risk assessment. From a realpolitik perspective, US actions removed two of Iran's implacable enemies from power. Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime had been the most constant, proximate, and mortal threat to revolutionary Iran, and the Taliban more than matched Iran's Shia millenarianism. For a moment, the Tehran regime appeared content to cooperate with the Bush administration, and there was even talk of a larger rapprochement. At the same time, the regime dispatched its proxies into Iraq immediately after the invasion in 2003. Muqtada al Sadr, a key Iranian proxy, was active inside Iraq in 2004. By 2006, Iran had inserted special group operatives under the

command of the Qods Force and was providing or sponsoring training and lethal bomb-making equipment to Sunni insurgents. Whether these actions were provoked by a US presence or were another expression of the traditional exceptional attitudes of the Iranian ayatollahs toward the “Great Satan” is immaterial: these are risky and provocative behaviors that the Iranian regime could not resist.

Iran has consistently inspired, financed, armed, and trained radical Shia groups in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. It is debatable whether alliances of convenience with Sunni or non-Shia groups represent greater prudence or greater willingness to take risks; in either case they mark a desire for broader influence. In extremis, as during the war with Iraq, the mullahs in Tehran were so desperate that they made clandestine arrangements with Israel and the United States. If this is realpolitik, it is a risky brand. These proxies have their own agendas, and while they are perfectly willing to get weapons, training, and assistance from Tehran, they are not always under Tehran’s control.

Iran’s relations with Syria and Lebanon are a critical part of its strategy, and a discussion of Iran’s risk tolerance necessitates an examination of its relationships with its de facto allies or quasi proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Syrian regime. Both have proven willing to take strategic and military risks and are prone to miscalculation.

Experts debate the extent of Hezbollah’s current autonomy from Iran, though Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and others remain adamant that the offspring is inseparable from its creator.⁵⁹ In 2006, as Iran faced increasing pressure from the international community for its illegal nuclear program, Hezbollah kidnapped three Israeli soldiers from within Israeli territory and triggered war between Israel and Hezbollah. While there was no evidence Iran explicitly directed Hezbollah’s move, this does not mean Iran did not earlier lay out the parameters of actions it desired Hezbollah to take at a time and place of that group’s operational choosing. The war did significant damage inside Lebanon, especially in Hezbollah-controlled areas. When Nasrallah apologized for

initiating conflict, saying, “We did not believe . . . that the captive operation would result in such a wide-scale war. . . . Had we known . . . we would not have carried it out at all,”⁶⁰ one wonders whether he directed it not only to the Shia in Lebanon, but also to Iran. Regardless of who was able to influence the decision to start it, the 2006 war certainly served to preoccupy the international community at a convenient juncture for the Islamic Republic. It is also a reminder that Iran is no more immune from the ill-considered actions of its proxies than any other previous sponsor has been.

Will Hezbollah be as rash in the future? Will a nuclear-armed Iran embolden the group? Will Iran be less willing to tolerate risky behavior on the part of its quasi proxies, fearing being drawn into nuclear conflict? There are no certain answers to these questions, yet the very uncertainty casts doubt on the prospects for deterrence. Some argue that Hezbollah is increasingly independent from its Iranian patron. The 2009 Rand Corporation report cautions against assuming that Hezbollah is willing under any circumstance to employ violence on Tehran’s behalf. Instead, it argues that a decision to act against the United States or its allies will be rooted in the group’s “own calculations about whether Iranian aid advances [its] own domestic agendas.”⁶¹ As Hezbollah becomes increasingly ingrained in Lebanese politics, its nationalist interests may continue to diverge from Iran’s.

Not all experts posit that Hezbollah’s autonomy from Iran is increasing, however. Some believe that Tehran’s disapproval over Hezbollah’s 2006 actions has resulted in its controlling the Lebanese organization more tightly today.⁶² The same Rand Corporation report details how Hezbollah’s ability to assert independence eroded after the 2006 war because the organization’s reliance on Iran actually increased as it turned to Tehran for rebuilding.⁶³ Since the report’s publication, Iran’s weaponry has become even more sophisticated, and it has ratcheted up the sophistication of its arms supply to Hezbollah. Hezbollah has in recent years developed alternative funding sources.⁶⁴ It is, however, unlikely to seek

complete financial independence from Iran at this time. As long as Iran remains a primary source of income for Hezbollah, the linkage between the two will remain tight. Whether this translates into more risky behavior is anyone's guess.

It is also unclear how rash Iran's other major quasi proxy, Syria, will be once Iran goes nuclear, if the Assad regime still holds sway. Like the Shia Iranians, the Alawite-dominated Assad family regime in Damascus is an odd man out among the region's Sunni royalty. Syria and Iran have conspired in Lebanon against Israel and opposite the government in Beirut. The Obama administration invested significant effort into its theory that Syria could be split from its Iranian patron and brought into the anti-Iranian fold.⁶⁵ These efforts have failed and underscore the value that the Assad regime places on its relations with Iran. History shows that Syria, like Hezbollah, is willing to take major risks in service of Tehran. From weapons-trafficking to Hezbollah to allowing the presence of IRGC camps on its soil to funneling al Qaeda terrorists into Iraq and more, Syria has displayed its willingness to endanger its own security to enhance its partner's. One lingering question is whether the Syrian nuclear plant at al Kibar, destroyed by Israel in 2007, was a purely Syrian affair. Some have surmised that the reactor was an offshore effort by Iran to continue its nuclear program on safer soil.⁶⁶ Whether this was the case has never been proven decisively, but the program's large expense and Syria's poverty suggest a partnership of some kind.

The Assad regime is clearly under immense domestic pressure and acting with extraordinary violence to suppress its own people. Perhaps assessing the landscape of the Arab Spring and the ignominious ends to the Mubarak, Moammar Gadhafi, and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali regimes, Assad has been willing to murder thousands to maintain his grip on power. It is not unreasonable to wonder what Assad, having made himself an even greater pariah in the region, would not do to reassert power locally and project power regionally. Will Damascus be emboldened by an Iranian nuclear umbrella? Will one be extended?

All in all, calculating Iran and its associates' propensity to take risks or escalate crises into conflict provides a good deal of worry for Americans and their allies. During the extended crisis over Iran's nuclear program, Clawson and Eisenstadt argue that Khamenei "has generally been loath to risk the Islamic Republic's grip on power."⁶⁷ Even scholars who see a general pattern of realpolitik and prudence in Iranian decision making grant that "Iran's policies toward Israel and the United States are often an exception."⁶⁸ But these tactical compromises divert attention from the larger strategic risks the regime is running: as painful as any war would be for the United States or Israel, it would also pose an existential risk to the Iranian regime. Certainly the domestic and international value of the nuclear program is very high to Khamenei and the senior Iranian leadership. It is likely that the Iranians value nuclear weapons not only for their deterrent purposes but also, if delivered by a suicide terrorist, for the intoxicating promise of devastating effect and potential deniability. It is also worth recalling that the Islamic Republic was created by risk takers who took full opportunity of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's weaknesses and then, in consolidating power, were willing to ride the wave of popular anger and emotion that surrounded seizing the US embassy in Tehran and holding US hostages in 1979, with very little understanding of what the result might be.⁶⁹ Whatever the true power and status of President Ahmadinejad within the regime, the presence of a radical populist as the leading civilian and international face of the government is not an expression of strategic caution.

The Dispute-Behavior Question

Does Iran have a pattern of dispute behavior that suggests how it may act in the event it acquires a nuclear arsenal? There is a clear pattern, though perhaps not the one so often described in the popular press. Far from being hothead provocateurs, Iran's leaders—including both Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad—often play a shrewd,

long game. The Council on Foreign Relations's Takeyh nicely outlined the Iranian *modus operandi*: Iran instigates a series of problems, each of which falls short of a full-blown crisis; Tehran then waits for accommodation and moves on. While there are multiple examples outside the nuclear arena, the nuclear program is a case in point. Each escalation—conversion, enrichment, installation of advanced centrifuges, higher enrichment—has been dribbled out. Iranian leaders have rarely been willing to provoke a crisis merely to shift the ground inexorably toward a particular goal.⁷⁰ Nor is this an aberration. Historically, the Islamic Republic has handled trouble well, and it has often emerged with its goals achieved at the end of each crisis.

The Hostage Crisis. On November 4, 1979, Iranian students seized the US embassy in Tehran. Images of the revolutionary youth holding US diplomats hostage seared into the American consciousness an image of the Islamic Republic that remains even after three decades. From the point of view of the hostage takers, however, the crisis was an unquestioned success, so much so that its perpetrators, many of whom subsequently assumed senior positions in government, express no regret. While they embraced animosity toward the United States, their true motivation had as much—if not more—to do with internal Iranian politics. Too often, President Carter's outreach and strategy backfired because he focused too much on contrived Iranian grievances and too little on the impact of Iranian rivalries and of the plausible deniability of responsibility such rivalries might provide.

Amidst the revolutionary turmoil in which ministers might remain in position for only a few weeks or months, Carter's aides approached a series of possible Iranian interlocutors. Rather than resolve disputes, each added new demands to prove revolutionary mettle to Khomeini. Though Khomeini was the ultimate authority, he refused to meet with any US interlocutors, forcing US officials to deal instead with lesser officials who would have no authority to negotiate an agreement. US officials rotated through

a series of interlocutors—German, UN, Palestinian Liberation Organization, and Algerian—until Iran's revolutionary leaders finally decided to release the hostages. From Khomeini's point of view, the crisis was of great benefit. It helped create a revolutionary crisis that Khomeini and his supporters used to purge more moderate forces from power. The protracted crisis humiliated the United States, ultimately bringing down the Carter presidency, and in the process bolstered Khomeini's image amongst the Iranian public. The Iranians' radical mediators gained legitimacy and cash, and with US acquiescence to the Algiers Accords, they also gained a number of political concessions. In the wake of the hostages' release, many former Carter administration officials explained how patience and dedication to diplomacy ultimately prevailed. The late Peter Rodman, however, suggested that it was not any particular diplomatic initiative that convinced the Iranians to release their hostages but the fact that Iraq's invasion of Iran had raised the cost of isolation to such a degree that Iran needed to end one crisis to better address another.⁷¹

Iran-Iraq War. The Iran-Iraq War included perhaps the bloodiest land battles of the post-World War II era. The brutal conflict, which combined the trench warfare and mustard gas attacks of World War I with modern weaponry and missile barrages, killed perhaps 1 million people. While Iraq started the conflict and Iran—beset by military purges and revolutionary turmoil—was on the defensive for the first two years, recently released Iranian documents suggest that Khomeini considered suing for peace in 1982 but was blocked by the IRGC, which wanted to continue the fight for ideological reasons. While many international mediators sought to negotiate a ceasefire, it was not until Khomeini determined the cost of continued warfare was too great for Iran to bear that he acquiesced.

In the interim, the struggle between pragmatists and ideologues within the Islamic Republic continued to impact Iranian negotiating behavior. As the war dragged on and Iranian pragmatists sought to

break their diplomatic isolation with approaches to Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, Mehdi Hashemi, the leader of the Office of Liberation Movements (the predecessor to the Qods Force), sought to undermine an Iranian outreach by seeking to sabotage Saudi Arabia's *Hajj* festivities and, separately, by kidnapping the Syrian chargé d'affaires in Tehran. Ultimately, the pragmatists came out on top, and Mehdi Hashemi was executed. But the lesson remains: any party in negotiation with Iran cannot expect the regime to abide by its agreements as long as its power centers remain fractious.

Indeed, the same pattern also undercut US attempts at rapprochement during Ronald Reagan's presidency. The roots of the Iran-Contra or Arms-for-Hostages scandal lay in national security adviser Robert McFarlane's quest to develop leverage amongst Iran's myriad power centers. Given Iran's isolation amidst the continuing war with Iraq, McFarlane speculated that provision of spare parts might enable US officials to develop relations with pragmatists amongst Iran's power centers that, in the short term, might be leveraged to win freedom for Americans seized by Iranian-backed groups in Lebanon and that, in the long term, might enable Americans to reconcile with Iran after the aging Khomeini's death. It did not work. Not only did hardliners seize upon the secret negotiations with the Americans in order to embarrass pragmatists and bolster hardliners, but the provision of incentives also backfired. While Iranian hostage takers did release some hostages in exchange for military spare parts, they then seized new hostages to continue the flow of arms.

Suppression of the Green Movement. The Iranian government has used a number of methods to suppress the Green Movement and other recent domestic dissent. In September 2007, the Supreme Leader promoted Mohammad Ali Jafari, then director of the IRGC's Strategic Studies Center, to head the IRGC. While at the IRGC's think tank, Jafari had promoted the so-called Mosaic Doctrine, which postulated that the chief threats to Iran's revolutionary ideology would come not from outside forces but

from discord within the country. Upon assuming command of the IRGC, Jafari reorganized the guard into separate units for each province (and two units for Tehran). It was this reorganization and the guard's new internal focus that enabled the regime to contain the protests that erupted after the June 2009 disputed elections.

Iran also uses other methods to suppress the Green Movement and other oppositionists. Whereas in the 1999 student protests the Iranian government used vigilantes to "crack heads" in the street, over the past decade the Iranian government has improved its surveillance and facial recognition capabilities. Troublemakers are arrested when they are alone or in the middle of the night when crowds are less likely to gather. Iranian authorities will arrest and, as in the case of the Kahrizak detention center, torture and kill detainees, but security officials will also furlough dissidents so their suffering might serve as a deterrent to others.

The regime often holds a Damocles sword over the heads of more prominent oppositionists—such as former presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami—by arresting key supporters and family members and threatening to prosecute them. Open-ended investigations discourage any politicians from stepping out of line.

The Surge in Iraq and After. Juxtaposing Iran's perceived situation in the aftermath of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein—encircled, with US forces dominating both Afghanistan and Iraq⁷²—against its perceptions three years later, we find a stunning change. The United States had lost the upper hand in Iraq, and Iran appeared to be the greatest beneficiary of the US invasion. President George W. Bush's decision to surge troops into Iraq in response to a spiraling loss of control was objectionable to Tehran, and it responded accordingly:

Iran's influence runs from Kurdistan to Basra, and Coalition sources report that by August 2007, Iranian-backed insurgents accounted for roughly half the attacks on Coalition

forces. This marked a dramatic change from previous periods that had seen the overwhelming majority of attacks coming from the Sunni Arab insurgency and al Qaeda.⁷³

Understanding that it could carve out an operating environment in Iraq without fear of substantial US retaliation, Iran proceeded to do so. Between 2003 and 2006, Tehran devoted substantial resources to financing, arming, and training proxies; infiltrating its own IRGC and Qods Force agents into Iraq; and building the Mahdi Army of Shia leader Muqtada al Sadr. The Iranian government diversified its support, using its own military, Hezbollahis from Lebanon, Iraqi proxies, and even Sunni proxies from al Qaeda in Iraq. Maintaining its signature arm's length distance from its agents, Iran maintained deniability about its activities—implausible but sufficient to ensure the US government could never persuade itself to initiate direct retaliatory action against Iran.

The Iranian-sponsored 2008 assault on Baghdad's Green Zone—home to US and foreign diplomatic and military facilities—underscored Iran's willingness to test the United States.⁷⁴ The brazen attack, which intelligence and markings on weapons clearly traced back to Iran, typifies the Iranian envelope-pushing modus operandi.

Since the success of the surge, Iranian handling of the Sadrist and protégé Muqtada al Sadr exemplify Tehran's willingness to play a long game. Sadr was pulled from Iraq for study, returning only in early 2011 to rally his supporters as the United States appeared to be a receding power.⁷⁵ Shrewd timing, and, for the moment, a hand well played.

Afghanistan. Iran has pursued a pragmatic, cautious policy to exert influence in Afghanistan over the past three decades of conflict, often playing both sides. During the anti-Soviet struggle in the 1980s, Tehran not only sheltered and funded seven Shia Afghan insurgent groups but also maintained ties to Kabul and Moscow. In the late 1990s, Iran's relations with Afghanistan under the Taliban reached its lowest point as Tehran threatened the Taliban with war when

the group massacred Afghan Shias and nine Iranians in northern Afghanistan in 1998. But Iranian leaders ultimately chose diplomacy over an all-out war.

Since the fall of the Taliban a decade ago, Iran has been using a combination of soft power and hard power tools to leverage its influence in Afghanistan at the expense of US interests. Immediately after the invasion, Iran set the stage for an offensive in Afghanistan by dispatching Hassan Kazemi Qomi, Qods Force commander and liaison to Hezbollah in Lebanon, to be Iran's consul-general in Herat and to coordinate Iranian assistance to Afghanistan.⁷⁶

And as the United States and its allies have now begun drawing down troops and transitioning security responsibilities to the Afghan security forces, Iran has stepped up efforts to fill the vacuum and speed up the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Once again, Iran is engaging both sides of the conflict. US and NATO officials have said that Iran has escalated its material support for the Taliban insurgency and proxy war against US forces in the country in the past year.⁷⁷ The IRGC Qods Force's Ansar Corps has overseen Iran's financial and material support to insurgents in neighboring Afghanistan.⁷⁸ Tehran has also begun engaging the Taliban diplomatically in an effort to maximize influence in Afghanistan's endgame once foreign troops leave the country. At the Islamic Awakening Conference held in Tehran in September 2011, Iran invited a senior Taliban delegation for talks. Sayyed Tayyeb Agha, a Taliban representative who held talks with US and NATO officials in Germany and Qatar earlier this year and then went missing after his name was leaked to the media, was reportedly present at the conference.⁷⁹

While US military and intelligence focus on Iranian hard power, they seldom discuss Iranian soft power efforts in Afghanistan, which are designed to combat US influence and win over the minds of the people. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, an influential Iranian state-charity organization, ostensibly provides relief assistance to the poor in Afghanistan.⁸⁰ With 35,000 Afghans on its payroll, its real aim is to advance Tehran's ideological and political ends in Afghanistan, promote Shia Islam,

and incite anti-American sentiment. Each year, the committee organizes Qods [Jerusalem] Day rallies in Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif, and Herat to express solidarity with the Palestinians and opposition to Israel, usually through temporary organizations like the Qods Day Celebration Committee, the Cultural Shura of Qods, or the Cultural Council of Supporters of Sacred Qods.⁸¹ It also provides relief aid to populations in areas affected by NATO airstrikes.⁸²

Iran exerts leverage over the Kabul government by initially creating a crisis or conflict and then offering to help resolve it. For example, whenever Afghanistan's policies displease Tehran, the Iranian government threatens to expel all Afghans living in Iran. It deports waves of refugees into lawless areas in Afghanistan without prior coordination with the Afghan government, which causes humanitarian crises and security problems and shields the movement of foreign terrorists into Afghanistan.⁸³ Tehran then seeks concessions from the Afghan government in return for a halt to the expulsion. With the security situation in Afghanistan at its nadir since the fall of the Taliban and among faltering economic-development and job-creation efforts, Iranian leaders correctly calculate that a fragile Afghanistan cannot absorb the over 2 million Afghans living in Iran.

Iran's increasing economic efforts also allow it to engage directly with the Afghan people, developing channels to provide educational resources to Afghans and to develop close ties with religious and ethnic minorities. Iran has complemented its economic interests in Afghanistan with efforts aimed at expanding Iran's educational, religious, and cultural influence in the country in recent months. It has also fostered ties with Shia minorities and sought to further its presence in Afghanistan's developing educational institutions. Iranian development projects in the Afghan capital of Kabul include a \$100 million-dollar university.⁸⁴

The Nuclear Question

Developing an indigenous nuclear-weapons program with all the necessary infrastructure, technical

knowledge, and material requires an enormous investment. The Iranian regime has developed its nuclear capabilities over the course of several decades, although the existence of the program in its current form was discovered only within the last decade. Iran has already demonstrated its ability to enrich uranium, the most difficult of the three primary elements of a nuclear-weapons program. (The other two are the weaponization of fissile material for a payload and the development of a delivery system.) It has also demonstrated the ability to advance its technical knowledge, as evident in its production of uranium enriched up to 20 percent. This is especially significant because the challenge of getting from 20 percent to weapons-grade requires only a small fraction of the effort required to enrich up to 20 percent.⁸⁵ The breakout time required for Iran to produce fuel for a nuclear weapon has also been reduced considerably as a result. In a detailed technical analysis for the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, Gregory S. Jones finds that Iran could now produce enough fuel for a nuclear weapon using its current stock of enriched uranium in roughly two months; the same task would have required two to four years according to Jones's estimates in 2008.⁸⁶ Recent International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) assessments have also highlighted evidence of Iran's experimentation and work on nuclear payloads, high explosives development, and the redesign of its medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) to house a nuclear warhead.⁸⁷ The agency's November 2011 report indicated that inspectors had corroborated information regarding Iran's weaponization work with the accounts of several IAEA member states and its own efforts.⁸⁸

Despite reports in 2010 and 2011 suggesting that Iran's enrichment program had been set back significantly by the Stuxnet software virus, the most recent IAEA assessments indicate that Iran's enrichment program has recovered. Yukiya Amano, head of the IAEA, rejected outright the assessment earlier this year that technical problems have disrupted Iran's enrichment program.⁸⁹ Its current stockpile of low-enriched uranium is sufficient to fuel four nuclear

TABLE 1
GROWTH IN NUCLEAR ARSENALS OVER TIME BY COUNTRY

	Year 1	Year 3	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9
United States	2	13	170	438	1,169
United Kingdom	1	14	28	35	70
France	4	36	36	36	70
Russia	1	25	120	200	660
China	4	36	36	36	45
Pakistan	3	13	23	33	43
India	2	14	26	38	50
Israel	2	6	11	15	20

SOURCE: Data adapted from Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, "Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945–2010," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 66 (July 2010): 77–83, <http://thebulletin.metapress.com/content/e32v5535wk255382/fulltext.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2011).

weapons once it is enriched to weapons-grade levels.⁹⁰ These developments demonstrate that the Iranian nuclear program has expanded and progressed despite technical hurdles, malfunctions, the recent sanctions regime, and a chorus of denunciations; Iran is moving rapidly toward acquiring a nuclear-weapons capability.

Historically, states that acquire the capability to develop nuclear weapons expand the size of their nuclear arsenal over time. The first eight nuclear countries all increased their arsenal sizes by varying degrees, particularly within the first decade of possessing their first weapons (see table 1).

These states now possess anywhere from several dozen to more than one thousand warheads. Although opinions as to what the Iranian regime might decide to do in building its arsenal abound, it is important to recognize that there is not a single historical case in which a country has gone nuclear and capped the size of its arsenal to one, two, or a handful of bombs.⁹¹ There is no basis in historical precedent or in the nature of the current Iranian regime to assert that Iran would defy this trend. A nuclear Iran can reasonably be expected to expand its quantitative nuclear force over time—in either a deployed state, a preconstruction form, or a combination—by amassing a requisite stockpile of bomb-grade material.

How large of an arsenal could Iran initially field? The primary resource input Iran acquired for its

uranium enrichment program was a 531-ton supply of yellowcake from South Africa. Over time, the Iranian program has converted a significant portion of this stockpile to uranium hexafluoride (UF₆), the feedstock used in centrifuges for enrichment. The IAEA confirmed in its May 2011 report that Iran has produced 371 tons of UF₆. This stockpile could be used to fuel a sizeable nuclear-weapons arsenal. Estimates of the amount of UF₆ required to produce fuel, or highly enriched uranium (HEU), for one nuclear weapon vary depending on efficiency rates. A conservative estimate for such an amount is ten tons.⁹² Thus, Iran's existing stockpile of UF₆ provides enough material to produce HEU for at least thirty-seven nuclear weapons. The projected size of the arsenal would not necessarily be limited to this estimate. Iran may have depleted much of the yellowcake it acquired from South Africa, but it possesses domestic uranium mines and is currently involved in mining these deposits outside the purview of IAEA inspectors. Its domestic-mining production could be supplemented through the import of yellowcake uranium from external suppliers.⁹³

It is a reasonable presumption that Iran's current capacity, supplemented by the development of its own mining industry and foreign resources, would facilitate the growth of a nuclear-weapons arsenal approaching, and possibly surpassing, that of the other regional nuclear powers. Importantly for the

United States and the question of deterrence, Iran stands on the brink of developing not just a single weapon but also a modest breakout capability for a more robust arsenal that would seem to fit both the practice of previous new nuclear states and provide a survivable deterrent. That is, Iran could acquire a large enough force to raise serious questions in the minds of US military planners that they could eliminate Iran's nuclear retaliatory options in a single raid or rapid-strike campaign. On the current trajectory, the US-Iran nuclear balance is likely to resemble traditional forms of the nuclear balance of terror.

Neither the nuclear policies of past US presidents nor of the Obama administration has accounted for this—or similar developments with other current nuclear or soon-to-be-nuclear states—in reckoning the needs of US nuclear forces. It is perhaps the most durable legacy of the Cold War that the United States remains almost solely focused on the balance with Russia and the arms-control legacy that has come to frame the issue.

The administration's 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* reflects what has been a growing US schizophrenia on the emerging nuclear world. The review describes the current weapon with chilling accuracy:

Concerns have grown in recent years that we are approaching a nuclear tipping point—that unless today's dangerous trends are arrested and reversed, before very long we will be living in a world with a steadily growing number of nuclear-armed states and an increasing likelihood of terrorists getting their hands on nuclear weapons.⁹⁴

At the same time, the review made clear that the administration intends to respond to these new facts almost entirely through arms control and diplomacy rather than reconsidering the need for a newer, more flexible and larger US nuclear force.⁹⁵ Almost simultaneously, it concluded the “New START” deal with Russia that reduced the number of deployed US nuclear warheads from 2,200 to 1,500 and hopes to conclude deeper reductions. The president prefers to

trust in an international nonproliferation regime rather than traditional deterrence through sufficient nuclear strength.

For the United States, the nuclear question must now include an element of the involvement question. That is, in the emerging multipolar nuclear world—where Iran is hardly the only likely new nuclear state, the balance among larger powers is shifting significantly with the growth of the Chinese and Indian arsenals, and the capabilities of “small” nuclear states like Pakistan are increasing—the number of tasks for the US nuclear deterrent force is multiplying, as is ambiguity about the deterrent calculus in each case. These new facts raise fundamental new questions about the nature of US extended deterrence and even more about the assurance of US allies facing new threats.

As John S. Foster Jr. and Keith B. Payne have pointed out, some threats can be countered only by nuclear weapons. They write, “Nuclear weapons may be the only means available for promptly destroying hard and deeply buried targets, achieving prompt war termination, preventing an adversary from marching on and annihilating civilian centers, or for possibly eliminating nuclear or biological threats arrayed against the United States and [its] allies.”⁹⁶

General Kevin Chilton, former commander of US Strategic Command, seconded the point in congressional testimony, saying, “The nuclear weapon has a deterrent factor that far exceeds a conventional threat.”⁹⁷ It is impossible to say with clarity or precision what US nuclear-force requirements for a nuclear deterrent to Iran might be, but that is exactly the point. Decisions about US nuclear capabilities remain on a Cold War trajectory, without analysis of an appropriate posture for today and tomorrow.⁹⁸

The Conventional Forces Order-of-Battle Question

The Iranian approach to military power, a highly asymmetrical strategy that substitutes nuclear weapons, irregulars, proxies, and terrorism for conventional

strength, is likewise inherently risky and increases the chances for miscalculation by both the Islamic Republic and its adversaries. With the overthrow of the shah and the breakout of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran has had neither the capacity nor the desire to build and maintain traditional military forces. The United States and other Western powers, which had provided much of the shah's weaponry, have refused to sell either new systems or spare parts for old ones to Iran since 1979. As Anthony H. Cordesman and Khalid R. al Rodhan note, "Iran built up major supplies of Chinese, Russian and other Eastern bloc weapons during the Iran-Iraq War, but its defeats in that war in 1988 resulted in the loss of some [40–50 percent] of its land order of battle."⁹⁹

Iran has also divided its military into regular and revolutionary components, with the inevitable politicization and loss of combat effectiveness. The regular army, the *Artesh*, has never raised a serious challenge to the revolutionary regime and remains politically subordinate to the IRGC, or *Pasdaran*, which "routinely exploits its access to the Supreme Leader's office, volunteers key advice on national and foreign policy matters . . . and actively aims to influence policy and debate on security issues."¹⁰⁰ The regular army has suffered a number of purges and forced retirements through the years while the IRGC has had more stable leadership. In addition, the *Basij* militias—martyrdom-seeking zealots who conducted the suicidal human-wave attacks in the Iran-Iraq War—remain a sometimes-waxing and sometimes-waning power; they are thought to be undergoing a bit of a revival under Ahmedinejad, formerly a *Basij* instructor. In the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential election, the *Basij* were given a prominent role in the internal crackdown and repression meted by the Iranian state. The *Basij* were formally incorporated into the IRGC's ground forces in October 2009.¹⁰¹

Much of Iran's conventional military modernization has been supplied by the Chinese and Russians. Beijing has sold thousands of tanks, artillery pieces, and armored personnel carriers; hundreds of fighters; and dozens of small warships to Iran. More critically, in light of Iran's embrace of an asymmetric approach,

the Chinese have supplied a variety of missile systems, from air defense and air-to-air missiles to anti-ship cruise missiles. The latter are among the most dangerous to US naval forces, especially in the confined waters of the Persian Gulf. In another indication of Iran's focus on asymmetric warfare strategy, including swarming and suicide boat tactics, Iran has increasingly "concentrated on acquiring and developing small, fast boats, some lightly armed and others armed with missile and torpedoes, and will probably continue this trend."¹⁰² Most recently, the IRGC navy announced that it intended to build armed copies of the Bladerunner-51 powerboat, a record-breaking speed vessel Iran evaded export controls to acquire in 2009.¹⁰³ Iran has also purchased M-11 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs)—capable of carrying a nuclear warhead—from the Chinese. Indeed, since the Iran-Iraq War and the missile exchanges that marked the War of the Cities that contributed to the final termination of that long, bloody, but indecisive conflict, missiles have been one of the key components of the Iranian military program.¹⁰⁴ A 2001 Rand Corporation study finds,

Almost all Iranian leaders see the possession of long-range missiles as vital for Iran's security. Missiles have certain advantages over aircraft for Iran today. Lacking access to spare parts from the West, Iran must turn to Russia or China for advanced aircraft. . . . In contrast, missiles are relatively easy to manufacture domestically, which helps Iran meet its goal of self-reliance. What they lack in flexibility . . . they make up for in their relatively low cost, their ease of concealment, the assurance of penetration, and the lack of the need to train pilots.¹⁰⁵

Between 1995 and 2010, Iran increased the number of missiles it possessed from several hundred to an estimated 1,000. Simultaneously, the Iranian missile program fielded increasingly more-sophisticated missiles, with particular emphasis on technical efficiency and range. Iran possessed primarily SRBMs in

the 1980s and 1990s and has developed MRBMs in recent years with the assistance of foreign technology. The regime now possesses the largest ballistic missile arsenal in the region with a range that covers the greater Middle East and parts of Europe. Although it is difficult to verify Iranian officials' claims regarding the technical capabilities of its arsenal independently, most open-source assessments indicate that the regime has generally increased the number, range, and efficiency of its missiles over time. Since taking over Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics in 2009, Iran's Defense minister and former Qods Force head Ahmad Vahidi has continued to develop the missile program as the centerpiece of Iran's weapons capabilities. A nuclear Iran would seek to develop increasingly sophisticated and longer-range ballistic missiles for its warhead-delivery platform and offensive capabilities.

Iran's development of the Shahab-3, Shahab-3 variant, and Sejil MRBMs, the latter solid-fueled with a range of approximately 1,200 miles, reflect its desire to bring not only Israel but also Europe—certainly as a potential deterrent against any US attack on Iran and to limit any European interest in long-term economic sanctions—into its sights. A 2011 UN assessment confirmed reports that Iran carried out covert ballistic missile tests of the nuclear-capable Shahab-3 and Sejil-2 missiles in October 2010 and February 2011.¹⁰⁶ Further, reports indicate that Iran is attempting to create new and longer-range variants based upon the North Korean Taepo-Dong-2, a three-stage rocket. This would bring Tehran into the realm of intercontinental-range ballistic missiles.¹⁰⁷ Iranian efforts to focus on developing its satellite launch capabilities also align with the development of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) technology. In 2009, Iranian officials touted the successful launch of its first satellite into orbit using rocket technology after several years of testing and preparation.¹⁰⁸ The technology required to deploy a space-launch vehicle can be transferred to develop ICBM capability. Coupled with Iran's nuclear-weapons ambitions, progress in such technology can be transferred to an ICBM program that provides Iran the missile platform required for

long-range nuclear-weapons capabilities. The Department of Defense judged in 2010 that “with sufficient foreign assistance, Iran could probably develop and test an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States by 2015.”¹⁰⁹

The Iranian military has demonstrated an interest in a number of conventional systems that would give it area or access-denial capabilities vis-à-vis US forces, although these investments have been limited. Land-based cruise missiles have been positioned near the Strait of Hormuz, and Iran has a number of relatively modern and quiet Russian-made Kilo submarines. Iran has also invested in advanced mines as a way to potentially interrupt shipping lanes in the region, and is “investing heavily” in advanced air defenses.¹¹⁰

At the other end of Iran's asymmetric spectrum is an increasing arsenal of irregulars, proxies, and terrorists. At the heart of the IRGC is the Qods Force with as many as 15,000 dedicated to unconventional warfare missions beyond Iran's borders. Major General Qassem Soleimani, who reports directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, commands the force. Originally designed to export the Islamic revolution, the Qods Force is organized into specific groups or corps by country or region. Qods forces often operate out of Iran's embassies; in some ways, they are a combination of military special operating forces and intelligence operatives. The Qods Force and the IRGC have directed and facilitated numerous global terrorist attacks, including the early 1980s bombings of US diplomatic and military installations in Lebanon, the 1990s bombings of the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community center in Argentina, and the 1996 bombing of US military housing at Khobar Towers, Saudi Arabia. Recently, the Qods Force directed a foiled plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States on US soil in a potential mass-casualty attack. In recent years the Qods Force has developed and directed Shia militia groups in Iraq and aided the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. It also controls many of Iran's training forces for unconventional warfare, not only in Iran but also in such countries as Sudan and

Lebanon. The successes of Qods Force trainers ought to be respected: they were key not only to making Hezbollah and local militias in southern Lebanon much tougher foes during the Israeli incursion in summer 2006 but also to supplying more lethal improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—including explosively formed penetrators—to Iraqi insurgents.¹¹¹ President George W. Bush described the effect of the Qods Force operation and underscored the difficulty of pinning the blame for such operations on the Tehran leadership:

I can say with certainty that the Qods Force, a part of the Iranian government, has provided these sophisticated IEDs that have harmed our troops. I do not know whether or not the Qods Force was ordered from the top echelons of government. What's worse: them ordering it and it happening, or them not ordering it and it happening?¹¹²

General David H. Petraeus recounted his experience of the Qods Force's influence in 2010, saying,

In the middle of the battle with the militia in March and April of 2008, a message was conveyed to me by a very senior Iraqi leader from the head of the Qods Force, Kassim Suleimani, whose message went as follows. He said, 'General Petraeus, you should know that I, Kassim Suleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan.' And indeed, the ambassador in Baghdad is a Qods Force member. The individual who's going to replace him is a Qods Force member.¹¹³

Uncertainty will also apply as to whether the top echelons of the Iranian government are ordering the Qods forces to provide IEDs or weapons of mass destruction. The asymmetric nature of the Iranian order of battle vastly complicates the deterrence equation.

This trend will continue as Iran both develops and acquires a range of antiaccess and area-denial

capabilities. These are, essentially, new forms of old technologies vastly improved in accuracy. The net result is to hold at risk the traditional forms of US power projection in the region: naval surface combatants including aircraft carriers, large land airbases, and points of deployment for land forces like ports and civilian airfields.¹¹⁴

While China's rapid military modernization and heavy investment in such technologies is the more immediate challenge to US conventional supremacy, Iran is following a similar path and learning similar lessons. As Andrew F. Krepinevich writes:

With the spread of advanced military technologies and their exploitation by other militaries, especially China's People's Liberation Army and to a far lesser extent Iran's military and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the US military's ability to preserve military access to two key areas of vital interest, the Western Pacific and the Persian Gulf, is being increasingly challenged. While both countries profess benign intentions, it is an old military maxim that since intentions can change overnight—especially in authoritarian regimes—one must focus on the military capabilities of other states.

Unless Beijing and Tehran divert from their current course of action, or Washington undertakes actions to offset or counterbalance the effects of their military buildups, it is practically certain that the cost incurred by the US military to maintain access to two areas of vital interest will rise sharply, perhaps to prohibitive levels, and perhaps much sooner than many expect. Currently there is little indication that China or Iran intend to alter their efforts to create "no-go zones" in the maritime areas off their coasts.¹¹⁵

These developments not only alter the balance of conventional military power but also call into question the US ability to employ overwhelming conventional forces as a deterrent against a small Iranian

nuclear arsenal. Marine General James Cartwright, recently vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and an officer highly regarded by President Obama, has asserted that ensuring “conventional can substitute for nuclear” deterrence is his “first priority.”¹¹⁶ Even when US conventional forces enjoy their greatest margin of supremacy, it is far from clear that they can fulfill all the tasks of deterrence, unless they are employed in ways that provide a sufficient threat to a regime like Iran’s, as will be discussed below.

The deterrent value of US conventional supremacy is also being undercut by continuous and well-publicized reductions in defense spending, which has been marked, in recent years, by a growing number of terminations and cancellations of the very weapons most likely to provide a proximate danger in Tehran’s eyes. New Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Martin Dempsey also testified at his confirmation hearing that the defense budget cuts proposed in a number of deficit-reduction plans “would be extraordinarily difficult” to implement and impose “very high risk” on future US forces in combat.¹¹⁷

Indeed, US forces are already on a path to a new kind of hollowness, facing crippling readiness shortfalls of long-term power projection, particularly in training for high-intensity, large-scale campaigns against a high-technology adversary. That is, the ability to deter Iran with conventional forces will be further weakened.

The Pentagon has skipped nearly a generation of modernization programs while, at the same time, failing to “transform” U.S. forces for the future. . . . All of the defense cuts [in 2009 and 2010] mortgaged the future to pay for the present.

Today, America’s military flies the same basic planes (e.g., F-15, F-16 and F/A-18 fighters; B-52, B-1 and B-2 bombers and a variety of support aircraft), sails the same basic ships (e.g., Trident ballistic missile and Los Angeles-class attack submarines, Aegis-equipped cruisers and destroyers, Nimitz-class aircraft carriers), and employs the same basic ground

systems (e.g., Abrams tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles, Black Hawk and Apache helicopters) that it did at the end of the Cold War. The White House and Congress prematurely terminated, or never brought to production, follow-on systems such as the F-22 fighter, the Seawolf-class sub, or the Comanche helicopter. As a result, tens of billions have been invested on development with little fielded reward.¹¹⁸

In sum, as new challenges from Iran grow, there has been little new US capability brought into service. The prospect of bringing new capabilities to bear in a timely fashion is imperiled by budget-reduction proposals. In his final day at the Pentagon, former Defense secretary Robert Gates suggested the purchases of F-35 fighters—almost the sole remaining large modernization project—“might be cut back as part of the Pentagon’s new budget review.”¹¹⁹

The result of further large-scale reductions in conventional forces can only weaken the United States’ ability to deter a nuclear Iran. In combination with announced Obama administration policies to draw down and withdraw US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, Tehran is likely to see the conventional balance—heretofore a daunting prospect—as tilting in its favor.

The Strategic-Culture Question

Are these patterns of behavior persistent enough to reflect Iranian strategic culture? In a 2001 study for the Institute for Defense Analysis and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Caroline E. Ziemke described an “introverted, intuitive, feeling” regarding Iranian “strategic personality”:

In its national and religious myth, Iran is and always has been the “Center of the Universe”—the site of . . . paradise on earth, the homeland of the world’s “global” superpower, the heart of Allah’s righteous society. But Iran has always been a center under siege: an Aryan people

surrounded by Arabs and Asians, Shi'a in the predominantly Sunni Muslim community, linguistically distinct from both the Arab and Turkic peoples that surround Iran, and philosophically and intellectually separate from the Christian West and the Orthodox East. The traditional self-image of Persia as the center of the universe reflects a cultural arrogance born of its ancient roots, inventive culture and abundant natural wealth. But it also reflects a sense of deep cultural grievance—the sense that throughout its long history, Persia/Iran has been plotted against, abused, misunderstood, and prevented from achieving its full potential by a hostile, jealous, but inferior outside world.¹²⁰

With a strong streak of cultural expansionism, she writes, “Iran has strived to build a cultural and/or religious buffer zone around its vision and its values.”¹²¹ In such a light, the behavior of the Islamic Republic appears less a break with the shah's and even the more distant past, and more a continuation of a longer and deeper tradition and understanding of Iran's rightful place in the world. This center-of-the-universe mentality is not so dissimilar from China's Middle Kingdom mind-set. Questions about the rationality or apocalyptic visions of the current clerical leadership or Ahmadinejad must be considered as a reimagining of the past, but the hope that a change of regime would entirely end all conflict seems somewhat misplaced.

Indeed, Ziemke's analysis is more cautious than many others'. Mehdi Khajali of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and once a seminarian at Qom in Iran, writes persuasively about the role visions of the apocalypse play in Iranian security policy. He argues that factions within the IRGC may consider themselves “soldiers of the Mahdi,” or hidden imam, whose apocalyptic return is a central theme of Shia Islam. Members of these factions “bear the responsibility of paving the way for his return,” and indeed these visions would appear to underlie Ahmadinejad's more extreme pronouncements.¹²² Kenneth M. Pollack of the Brookings Institution,

who served in the CIA and on the National Security Council staff during the Clinton administration, concluded his exhaustive memoir, history, and analysis of US-Iran policy with the observation that “the current regime in Tehran is determined to resist all foreign pressure to acquire [nuclear] weapons and, when it has done so, may revert to an aggressive, anti-status quo foreign policy that could destabilize the Middle East and threaten the vital interests of the United States and its allies.”¹²³

As with China, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the deterrent threshold for Iran will be a high one. Also like China, the Islamic Republic is an unsatisfied power, and its strategic horizons may be more narrowly drawn—although given Iran's links to international terrorist organizations, its ability to operate on a global scale should not be underestimated—but its sense of threat is probably greater. China has some sense that its rise is inevitable, that, if current trends continue, it will enjoy the great-power status that it considers its due. Iran appears to suffer from a kind of strategic nervousness, both because Iranian power is inherently lesser and more constrained and because the direction of the relevant current trends is harder to understand. Iran must question things such as whether the United States will remain or withdraw in Afghanistan and whether the United States will have an alternative presence in the region, perhaps in Kuwait, following the announced withdrawal from Iraq. At any rate, maintaining a credible deterrent—that is, one the Supreme Leader and the rest of the regime understand to be credible—will be a challenge.

Americans often find it difficult to appreciate the habits and traditions of US strategy making and sustaining the burdens of a world's worth of security. This is particularly true in an environment marked by slow economic growth, a focus on federal debt and deficits, and “war weariness” over Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, President Obama is framing his force-withdrawal plans as a return to “nation-building at home.”¹²⁴

A faltering moment is not the same as a long-term trend, particularly in a region that has seen rising US

commitment for more than a generation. Perhaps the most succinct summary of the constant concerns of US strategy makers is found in the report of the Independent Panel on the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), a blue-ribbon panel named by Congress to assess the 2010 Pentagon review.¹²⁵ In particular, the bipartisan panel, chaired by former Defense secretary William J. Perry and former national security adviser Stephen J. Hadley, concluded:

Most obviously, the number, duration, and character of conflicts in the greater Middle East have been unanticipated. The conflict with Iraq has gone through at least five phases: the initial response to the invasion of Kuwait, Operation Desert Shield, defense of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbors; Operation Desert Storm, ejection of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, and crippling Saddam Hussein's offensive capacity; the period of containment, including more than 100,000 no-fly zone sorties and the more-or-less permanent stationing of an Army brigade set of equipment in Kuwait, from 1991 through 2003; Operation Iraqi Freedom, the 2003 invasion and toppling of the Saddam regime; and the current and continuing post-invasion effort to build a viable Iraqi state, an effort that—if successful—will stretch indefinitely into an ongoing strategic partnership. But Iraq is neither the only example nor an anomaly: the American commitment to Afghanistan is in its ninth year and disengagement is likely to be many years away. . . .

Since the removal of the Saddam regime and its bid for regional hegemony, Iran and its allies (like Syria) and terrorist proxies (like Hezbollah) have emerged as an increasingly destabilizing force in this vital region. The Iranian regime's drive to develop a nuclear capability seems first designed to deter American influence and intervention. But it may also embolden Tehran to increase its aggression through proxies, terrorism, and other forms of irregular warfare to undermine neighboring

governments, particularly the oil-rich Arab regimes. An Iranian threat, in turn, will compel these states to both accommodate Iran and consider their own nuclear and advanced conventional programs, particularly if there is doubt about U.S. capacity and commitment. This becomes a strong argument for continuing America's long-term commitment to and presence in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.¹²⁶

Preventing the rise of a hostile hegemon—be it an external power like the Soviet Union or a local regime like that of Saddam Hussein or revolutionary Iran—has become encoded in America's strategic genes. The importance of the region and its energy reserves has not lessened as an element of the international balance of power, either. The QDR review panel also foresaw rising global competition for such resources increasing the likelihood of conflict.

The combination of the increasing demand for (particularly from a China and India on the rise) and diminishing supplies of hydrocarbons and the increasing global water scarcity will tend to link the two geopolitical trends above; that is, the turmoil in the greater Middle East will have ever-larger global consequences and attract increased interest from outside powers, both raising the potential for and perhaps the scope of instability and conflict.¹²⁷

A number of common themes emerge from a quick consideration of the principles of deterrence to the particulars of the US and Iranian cases. First, the strategic competition between Washington and Tehran has been long lasting and ongoing, and is likely to increase in future; conversely, the prospects for a resolution of differences, let alone the imagined condominium, are low. Second, the competition reflects the most deeply held strategic beliefs, tenets, and doctrines of both the United States and Iran and involves what both countries regard as core security interests; that is, neither side is likely to step back for long from an energetic pursuit of current policies. Third, the

number of specific areas and points of competition is increasing; these are best regarded as sore spots, opportunities for misunderstanding and competition to become open conflict rather than opportunities to reach accord. Fourth, the military trends appear to be shifting in Iran's favor, not only in regard to nuclear issues but also—and what should be especially worrisome from a Washington perspective and considering

the American desire to rely on conventional supremacy to achieve strategic effects—in regard to the conventional balance. Iran is in no position to defeat US forces in a traditional sense, but its ability to deny the United States the level of conventional supremacy upon which current US policy depends is within Tehran's sight. Taken altogether, the task of deterring a nuclear Iran is extremely forbidding.

US Military Requirements for Assured Deterrence

While there can never be certain deterrence, Cold War presidents often had confidence that the United States had sufficient military power to support a policy of containment through a strategy of deterrence; for most of the period they felt that deterrence was assured. It is worth repeating Dean Acheson's basic formulation: "American power would be employed in stopping [Soviet aggression and expansion], and if necessary, would inflict on the Soviet Union injury which the Moscow regime would not wish to suffer."¹²⁸ Assured deterrence began with assured destruction of the Soviet regime.

Having briefly assessed Iran's behavior by the standard measures of deterrence theory, it seems plain that a similar assured-destruction, assured-regime-change capability is required to have confidence in a policy of containment and a strategy of deterrence toward Tehran. Indeed, Iran's actions are at least as likely, if not more likely, to be erratic and provocative than were Soviet actions. Thus it would seem that a policy of Iran containment based upon a strategy of deterrence must meet the basic Cold War standard of credibility, which included three criteria. The first was an adequate US nuclear arsenal of offensive systems, what became the triad of bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons, land-based ballistic missiles, and then submarine-launched ballistic and cruise missiles. While US nuclear doctrines shifted, encompassing highly detailed scenarios for nuclear exchange to simple mutual-assured destruction, the fundamental strategic requirement was widely accepted and long-standing. The second element was a substantial investment in forward-deployed and reinforcing conventional forces. In Germany, for example, the permanent covering force numbered in the hundreds of thousands (and usually included theater

nuclear forces) backed up by the potential for rapid and large-scale reinforcement, translating into a "10 divisions in 10 days" measure. Again, specific war-fighting doctrines changed with technologies and circumstances, but there was broad consistency of approach through the decades. Third, the deterrent posture depended on the preservation of strong alliances that permitted relatively good policy integration, military cooperation, and basing and access for US forces. The United States swore to defend Europeans and Asians, but Europeans and Asians agreed to provide the battlefield as well as their own forces. All in all, the success of this inherently complicated endeavor demanded an immense and sustained US effort.

The nucleus of the Cold War deterrent system was the US nuclear arsenal, which by the end of the conflict numbered more than 20,000 warheads and thousands of delivery systems. Properly defining a US nuclear deterrent for Iran would require greater analysis than the scope of this paper can offer, but a number of broad requirements are apparent. To begin with, nuclear deterrence must be persistent: dedicated forces must be active, available, and present, at least in the mind of the adversary. These qualities were regarded as essential for Cold War deterrence and an underlying strategic logic. They were also reflected in the nuclear force-planning and operational concepts of the era, in the readiness rates and alert status of aircraft and ICBMs, and in deployment rates for nuclear submarines.

Further, the United States offered an extended nuclear deterrent to its allies around the world not only to prevent the use of Soviet short-range systems but also to lessen the opportunities to exert political pressure by such threats. In addition to forces based in the United States, a variety of theater nuclear forces

were deemed critical. The divisive debate over the deployment of Pershing II intermediate-range missiles in Germany—agreed as necessary by both the German and US governments—reflected the underlying strategic reality. Secretary of State Clinton struck a strikingly similar strategic note in 2009. Though she carefully refrained from mentioning nuclear forces directly, the logic of her argument was familiar:

We want Iran to calculate what I think is a fair assessment that if the United States extends a defense umbrella over the region, if we do even more to support military capacity of those in the [Persian Gulf], it's unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer, because they won't be able to intimidate and dominate as they apparently believe they can once they have a nuclear weapon.¹²⁹

The role of US offensive nuclear forces as an extended deterrent or the central feature of a defense umbrella covering US friends and allies and their interests across the greater Middle East will be critical. Such an extended deterrent is not only essential for assuring those like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which at present do not possess nuclear forces of their own but have the means and, in the face of a nuclear Iran, the motive. It is also important for reassuring those who already possess nuclear systems—the Israelis, in particular. The region is already highly unstable, and a nuclear Iran would make it more so. Absent a credible US offensive deterrent—one that is present, persistent, and appropriate—the prospects for a policy of containment are bleak.

Current US nuclear force-planning and operational concepts remain keyed to Russian forces and the ongoing arms-control negotiations with Russia.¹³⁰ It is beyond the scope of this report to specify precisely what a sufficient deterrent force would be in regards to Iran, but the prior point is that some Iran-specific element of US nuclear forces is required to give effect to the strategy of deterrence. To put it bluntly, Tehran must be certain that the United States has appropriate, proximate, and present nuclear

forces, that punishment or denial is certain. In the Cold War, such strategic demands resulted in the deployment of theater nuclear forces (including intermediate-range ballistic missiles) and nuclear weapons designed to allow for counter-force strikes, that is, limited nuclear strikes against Soviet nuclear forces rather than only counter-value, or massively destructive, options.

In sum, adopting a policy of containment and a policy of deterrence would have implications for US nuclear policy and forces. However, current policies and plans do not reflect such considerations. Current US nuclear forces are not well prepared to provide deterrence against a nuclear Iran.

The deterrent value of US conventional forces is equally uncertain, if only because US policy and posture throughout the region is in flux. To provide sufficient deterrent value, conventional forces must be credibly capable of delivering the kind of punishment that the Iran regime would not wish to suffer. This, inexorably, means that the United States must maintain the perceived ability to remove the Tehran regime from power; limited, punitive conventional strikes are likely to have only a temporary effect. A conventional force capable of deterring Iran not only from the use of nuclear weapons—actual use or by diplomatic intimidation—but also from destabilizing the region or asserting its hegemonic ambitions, must meet the same qualitative, if not quantitative, standards of the Cold War. There must be a sufficient covering force present to reassure allies and limit Iranian influence or aggression by proxies, and there must be sufficient force available in a crisis or open conflict to pose a credible regime-change threat.

A regime-threatening conventional force must be a large force. The question is not whether a full-blown regime-changing campaign like the initial phases of operations Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom is wise or the only method of regime change in Iran, but whether it is a threat needed for assured or credible deterrence. The biggest challenge for a force of such size will be its deployment, which must also be rapid. Again, the Cold War standard of

ten divisions deployed from the continental United States within ten days is illustrative of the strategic logic, if not of the precise operational requirement; the threshold test is to move a large force and to move it fast.

Perhaps the greatest uncertainty and a critical element in future deterrence will be the presence of US forces in the Persian Gulf region and the access to air bases, ports, and other facilities that would be needed to close a substantial force. (See map 2 on page 49.) The laborious and lengthy standing-start deployment of Operation Desert Shield will be all but impossible to conduct under the threat from a nuclear Iran. Some significant US presence in Iraq should be regarded as a necessary, but hardly sufficient, element of conventional deterrence. A credible conventional deterrent posture in Iraq would demand a continued US presence of at least 20,000, to include a significant joint-service headquarters commanded by a three-star general or flag-rank officer; brigade combat teams in northern, southern, and central Iraq; a substantial training element; and a composite Air Force wing. There was discussion in both Baghdad and Washington about renegotiating the status of forces agreement to maintain US forces in Iraq past 2011; however, the president announced in October that the United States will withdraw all US forces by the end of the year. The White House's decision dramatically fails to meet the threshold test. It is also a clear signal to the Iraqi government of a loss of US commitment and an incentive for the Baghdad government to lean toward Tehran, or in Tehran's direction, on issues such as aid and comfort to the Assad regime in Syria.

Continued US presence in Kuwait and access to facilities there is equally essential. The US partnership with Kuwait has been solid since the end of the 1991 Gulf War, and the periodic presence of US ground, naval, and air forces, as well as the use of key facilities, has been considered by Kuwaitis as critical to their own security and survival as an independent state. However, this concentration of forces and facilities could become a weakness in a time of conflict, a relatively small and close-range target for

Iran and precisely the reason Iran is so interested in antiaccess capabilities.

The story is the same elsewhere through the western reaches of the Persian Gulf and the northern Arabian Sea. Bahrain has long played host to the Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters, but not only is this well within range of Iranian forces, but Iran also plays a large role in exacerbating the legitimate grievances of the repressed Shia majority there. Access to and training arrangements with other Gulf Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, will have to be maintained.

Containment and deterrence argue for a strong US and allied posture to the east as well. Just as an enduring US military presence in Iraq is critical for deterring a nuclear Iran, so will it be needed in Afghanistan. To be sure, the principal strategic purpose of a long-term US strategic partnership with the Afghans is driven primarily by the need for internal stability—avoiding a civil war or the restoration of a Taliban-like state—and concerns about Pakistan, but it is nearly as critical if Iran is to be deterred and contained. Iranian influence is traditionally strong in western Afghanistan; conversely, US operations since 2002 have focused on the Kabul region and southern and eastern Afghanistan.

A third facet of a deterrence-and-containment approach would be a strategic and military reengagement across Iran's north. While Turkey remains an important US ally and Ankara's own security interests would be deeply affected by a nuclear Iran, the relationship has soured since the heady times of the first Gulf War and the long-running no-fly-zone operations that followed. Moreover, Turkey's strategic interests have shifted substantially. Beyond the challenges of relations with the United States (and Israel), the frustrations of failure to win European recognition plus the rise and durability of the AK Party have seemed to shift Turkey's orientation, and, at the moment, it is acting more independently. A nuclear Iran might present the United States with an opportunity to reestablish a closer partnership with Turkey; conversely, even a nonaligned Turkey would be a problem for deterrence and containment. The United States has often been indifferent to the

well-disposed states in the Caucasus—Georgia and Azerbaijan—which could provide key outposts in regard to Iran. While the indifference is most often the result of US-Russia policy (the 2008 Georgia war being the obvious example), the effect is also a problem when it comes to Iran. The northern front of a deterrence and containment posture would not demand large forces, but it would require more constant US policy, defense exchanges and cooperation, access to facilities, joint exercises, and the like.

Taken together, a serious policy of containment and strategy of deterrence calls for constant and significant conventional force presence around Iran's perimeter. Although requiring far fewer forces than in Europe or Asia during the Cold War and far fewer than have been needed to fight the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, the total might easily approach 80,000. Land and land-based air forces in Iraq, the Gulf, and Afghanistan alone might be 50,000 or more, and maritime forces plus various headquarters and training missions could add another 30,000. Not a huge force, but the need to support, sustain, and rotate units would drive the bottom-line force-structure bill to 350,000 out of the total active force. This force now numbers 1.3 million, but when already enacted budget cuts come fully into effect, it may drop to 1.1 million. Further budget and force cuts would make the overall contain-and-deter posture a disproportionately large one for a reduced force.

The forces needed for reinforcement in times of crisis or conflict are equally difficult to estimate with precision but equally close to the limits of the future US military that would be the result of the budget cuts and force reductions in view. Operationally, a reinforcing deployment of forces would need to meet two very challenging hurdles: the near-immediate initiation of a large-scale strike campaign to destroy, with a high degree of confidence and certitude, Iran's fielded nuclear capabilities and to control the nuclear facilities, materials, and infrastructure—including the scientists, engineers, and work force that comprise the human infrastructure—to limit the dangers of "loose nukes," rapid reconstitution by Iran, or proliferation to others.

The nature of a strike campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities has been the source of much speculation and some research in the press and other public domains in recent years.¹³¹ There is no quick-and-easy solution, no Osirak-like, one-attack answer. Indeed, the analysis presented on Iran's nuclear program strongly suggests that Tehran has learned the lessons of Israeli strikes on Iraq and Syria and is pacing its program with an eye toward presenting the world with a robust and survivable nuclear capability. As Meir Dagan, the recently retired head of Israeli intelligence, put it, not only would destroying Iran's nuclear capability be beyond Israel's conventional capability, but "it will be followed by a war with Iran. It is the kind of thing where we know how it starts, but not how it will end."¹³²

What is impossible for the Israeli defense forces would also be extremely challenging for the US military. The first requirement is for rapid deployment and simultaneous attack to diminish the prospects of an Iranian second or retaliatory nuclear strike, aimed at not only the United States or US forces but also others in the region or in Europe. Of course, there can never be a guarantee of getting it all in the first attacks, but unless there is a high degree of confidence in delivering what amounts to a nuclear knock-out blow, the United States rather than Iran will be the deterred party. Such a paralyzing strike would also demand attacks on Iranian military command and control and civilian government targets. It would require a sustained effort. The presumption that a strike campaign would be followed by a war with Iran is the only sound basis for military planning.

Such a strike campaign might easily tax the full range of US capabilities, from long-range bombers and unmanned systems to cruise missiles launched from submarines and surface combatants to thousands of tactical aircraft sorties. Indeed, any sustained campaign, any campaign longer than forty-eight hours, would ultimately rely on tactical aircraft, and the most sophisticated, fifth-generation aircraft, the F-22 and the F-35. Only those platforms can generate the weight and durability, as well as the tactical flexibility, such a campaign would demand.

At the same time, it would be impossible to maintain such a campaign absent access to a large number of regional airfields. This cannot be a unilateral US effort if it is to succeed tactically.

A parallel and near-simultaneous effort must be made to secure physically some number of the most important Iranian nuclear facilities. Short of employing a low-yield nuclear weapon, no level of conventional attack can fully destroy these facilities, particularly those that are hardened or buried underground. The need to secure the sites, to prevent a nuclear-related accident, retaliation by unconventional means (as with a dirty bomb made with nuclear materials), and to forestall reconstitution or proliferation, will be urgent. This is not a mission that can await postwar UN inspections. There would be an operational imperative to insert relatively small but still substantial, sustainable, and robust forces on the sites in question. They would need to do thorough damage assessment, rapid intelligence exploitation, and fully secure what remains—including the people who remain—all in the midst of a larger war and a hostile Iranian population. This would be extremely challenging, but the strategic and operational logic would be extremely powerful. Failure to secure the most critical attacked sites would make it difficult to end the conflict or to have confidence in any postwar outcome.

The initial strike-and-seize efforts are best thought of as the opening phases of a war, not the sum total of the conflict. There is no way to reestablish peace on the basis of the status quo, and keeping Iran in its box—as was tried with Saddam Hussein's Iraq—is equally unlikely. Indeed, there might be a lengthy operational pause to build up forces in the region to continue the conflict or to frame negotiations, but the object should be regime change in Tehran. How could a US government, its regional allies, or the rest of the world contemplate leaving the revolutionary regime in power under such circumstances? It would be preferable to achieve regime change in negotiation with Iranians; invading Iran or conducting postwar stability operations would be extremely unpalatable and probably

more difficult than in Iraq or Afghanistan. As has been apparent, there is deep opposition within Iran to the current regime, but the credible threat of regime change by force would be a precondition to achieving the result with less bloodshed.

The size and composition of a force capable of credible regime-change, even supposing that prior seize-and-strike efforts have been successful, can be imagined only in the most general, qualitative terms. It must be large, both as measured by firepower and troop strength. The credible threat will be based upon the perceptions of the Iranian leadership that it faces an imminent air-land invasion. And, of course, it must have been deployed in a timely fashion, including deployed by sea; there is no way to get the bulk of the materiel to the theater any other way. Prepositioned stocks will be necessary but are likely to have been composed for and consumed by the strike campaign. Again, any worthwhile analysis of the requirements for a decisive, regime-changing air-land campaign is beyond the scope of this study.

It helps to recall the size and scope of operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm; an invasion of Iran or a credible threat of invasion would be a contest more akin to the 1991 war than the 2003 blitz to Baghdad, a maneuver than had been in preparation for a decade. In the first Gulf War, the United States deployed more than 1,300 tactical fighters and strike aircraft, 285 tankers, 175 airlifters, and more than 200 other support planes for a total of just under 2,000; most of these were land-based aircraft, but carrier air played a significant role. In addition, coalition partners contributed more than 500 other aircraft, most usefully and notably 276 Saudi strike and fighter planes.¹³³ The Army deployed two full corps of seven divisions and two cavalry regiments, and the Marines deployed a corps-sized expeditionary force that got a good deal of its heavy punch from an attached Army armored brigade.¹³⁴ The Navy surged a six-carrier fleet plus dozens of surface combatants capable of firing Tomahawk cruise missiles; it also feigned an amphibious landing that tied down large Iraqi formations on the coast of Kuwait.¹³⁵

This is not to say that a credible Iran deterrent force would be identical; it is simply to provide an order-of-magnitude benchmark. Generating such a force may be beyond the capabilities of the future US military, at least if current budget trends are not reversed. The active-duty Army is on course to shrink to 400,000 soldiers; 500,000 soldiers were deployed to Southwest Asia for Desert Storm. The US Air Force is on course for about 1,200 total tactical aircraft, the Navy for eight carrier battle groups and thirty-three attack submarines. In the aftermath of a recent strategic defense review, the British army retains a single armored brigade.¹³⁶

Comparisons to the Desert Storm era are illustrative and nothing more. The question that needs analysis is what kind of force is operationally capable

of conducting a regime-change campaign in Iran and, more to the point, what kind of threat would be understood by Iranians as a credible deterrent. What ought to be obvious is that current US defense planning is entirely devoid of such analysis and thus the military posture required for containment and deterrence cannot be assumed.

In both nuclear and conventional realms, the United States and its containment-coalition partners are likely to lack the military means to make a deterrent posture credible either to the Iranians or to ourselves. This reprises a recurring Cold War lesson: empty attempts at containment and deterrence are not just half-answers but positive incentives to an adversary predisposed to discover weakness, ambitious for power, and regarding itself with a historic destiny.

The Costs of Containment

It is always possible that Iran will be deprived of its nuclear option by military action, that the current regime in the Islamic Republic will be overthrown, or that sanctions will bring the regime to the table with meaningful concessions, but there is every possibility that none of these scenarios will come to pass. Indeed, the history of aspiring nuclear powers is relatively uniform: barring military action (or the perception of imminent military action in the case of Libya), would-be nuclear states such as Pakistan and North Korea have achieved their goals.

Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, these options will remain on the table, but there will be a new layer of strategic challenges and constraints—not simply the day after, but well into the future. Many have suggested that containing a nuclear Iran is a reasonable option, possibly more desirable than confrontation. Thus, we may consider that containing and deterring a nuclear Iran is the least-worst option before us.

We appear to be backing into containment, not making a choice; the policy will be thrust upon us and we will discover only after the fact what the true risks and costs are. Consider that until now debate about Iran has assumed transparency about Iranian acquisition of sufficient nuclear material and subsequent breakout from nonproliferation regimes. News articles report authoritatively on centrifuges running, stockpiles of fissile material, and specific months and years until the bomb. But the clarity in these deliberations—both public and classified—is belied by history. Both Pakistan and North Korea broke through to bomb-making capacity sometime in the 1980s and 1990s respectively. To this day, intelligence agencies are uncertain when the line was crossed. As a result, we were left discussing preventative options when the question was already moot.

In other words, if we are unwilling to strike a nuclear-armed Iran, we may be forced into containment. The requirements of containment are burdensome, and the American footprint in the region is shrinking rather than growing. This is not a strategy that can simply be subcontracted to others; arming Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and others is unlikely to provide assurances to those countries, let alone to Israel, that Iran is, to use the 1990s vernacular, in a box. The force brought to bear against Saddam Hussein in the 1990s—including substantial basing rights in the region and an underlying and justifying UN resolution—are unlikely to be in place vis-à-vis a nuclear Iran.

Some will insist that containing Iran is hardly an epic challenge, arguing that

Iran is, if anything, more vulnerable to long-term pressure than the USSR was. It is smaller and weaker in every dimension. Its economy is a mess. Its oil weapon fires backward as well as forward, because oil sales keep Iran's economy afloat. And, unlike the Soviet Union, Iran has no conceivable hope of disarming or crippling America with a first strike; America's deterrent against Iran is massive, credible, and impregnable.¹³⁷

This analogy reflects a mangled understanding of what containment and deterrence require when they are applied to Iran; the underlying structures of the policy and strategy are relevant, but the particulars are not. Worse, the analogy casts Cold War containment as an excessively rosy light. Containing the Soviet Union was hardly a cost-free exercise. Take just one measure of those costs: wars were fought in Korea and Indochina and between Soviet and US

proxies in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Are these tolerable consequences to a nuclear stand-off with Iran? And what of the likely proliferation of weapons of mass destruction regionwide in response to an Iranian nuclear acquisition? Would we welcome a Saudi Arabia with nuclear weapons?¹³⁸ What if the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Turkey, and others followed suit?

There is also an underlying question about US strategy and influence in the Middle East and around the world. US national security strategy in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decade of this one has rested squarely on the premise that the Middle East is a critical region for the United States. Since the creation of what has become US Central Command in 1979, our commitment to the region has risen consistently. Americans have deployed, fought, and given their lives to prevent a hostile hegemon, whether an outside power like the Soviet Union or a local aspirant like Saddam Hussein's Iraq or the regime in Iran, from dominating the region. In this regard, Obama has proven to be no different than George W. Bush or any of his predecessors.

The US position in the region is also a critical element in the global balance of power. Our preeminence assures our allies in Europe and East Asia that the region's energy supplies will remain available and that the region's political problems and violence will be mitigated. It is the presumption of those who promote the policy of containment and the strategy of deterrence of a nuclear Iran that this will preserve the current order, the status quo. We cannot agree. How, in the face of an Iranian nuclear capability, ought we respond to an escalation of support for Hezbollah? For Hamas? For terrorists and insurgents elsewhere, in an alliance of convenience with al Qaeda or Los Zetas? Iran is doing its best to preserve the Assad regime in Syria from the wrath of its people; we choose not to intervene for the moment but would we have the option if Iran had nuclear weapons? One need not be especially imaginative or alarmist to understand the crippling effect of an Iranian nuclear breakout. The object of deterrence in the region would not reside in Tehran but in Washington.

For the United States to adopt a policy of containment based upon a military strategy of deterrence toward a nuclear-armed Iran would be a risky and costly course. It would be risky because revolutionary Iran has proven itself to be an expansionist and ambitious power prone to provocation; the likelihood that it would continue to threaten fundamental US national security interests, even when red lines are clearly and repeatedly drawn, would not diminish. We can conclude only that obtaining a nuclear arsenal, particularly one that creates a survivable-deterrent capability, will embolden the Tehran regime.

It should come as no surprise that the costs of containment and deterrence will be high for the United States and its coalition partners. These costs are not limited simply to the Middle East, as the recent plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador while he dined at a Washington restaurant suggests. The issues raised by Iran's increasing activities in Latin America are beyond the scope of this paper and remain to be fully appreciated, but they add a further dimension of complexity to the contain-and-deter approach.¹³⁹ The diplomatic, strategic, and military costs of containing and deterring are already high. Consider the military costs alone: a renewed offensive nuclear deterrent, both in the United States and extended to the region; prolonged counterintelligence, counterterrorist, and counterinsurgency operations around Iran's perimeter; a large and persistent conventional covering force operating throughout the region and a reinforcing force capable of assured regime change; and energetic military-to-military programs with coalition partners. Such a deterrent posture is not only near or beyond the limits of current US forces—and we know of no substantial body of studies that has analyzed in sufficient detail the requirements for a containment posture—but would certainly surpass the capabilities of the reduced US military that proposed budget cuts would produce.

In conclusion, we find that though containment and deterrence are possible policies and strategies

for the United States and others to adopt when faced with a nuclear Iran, we cannot share the widespread enthusiasm entertained in many quarters.

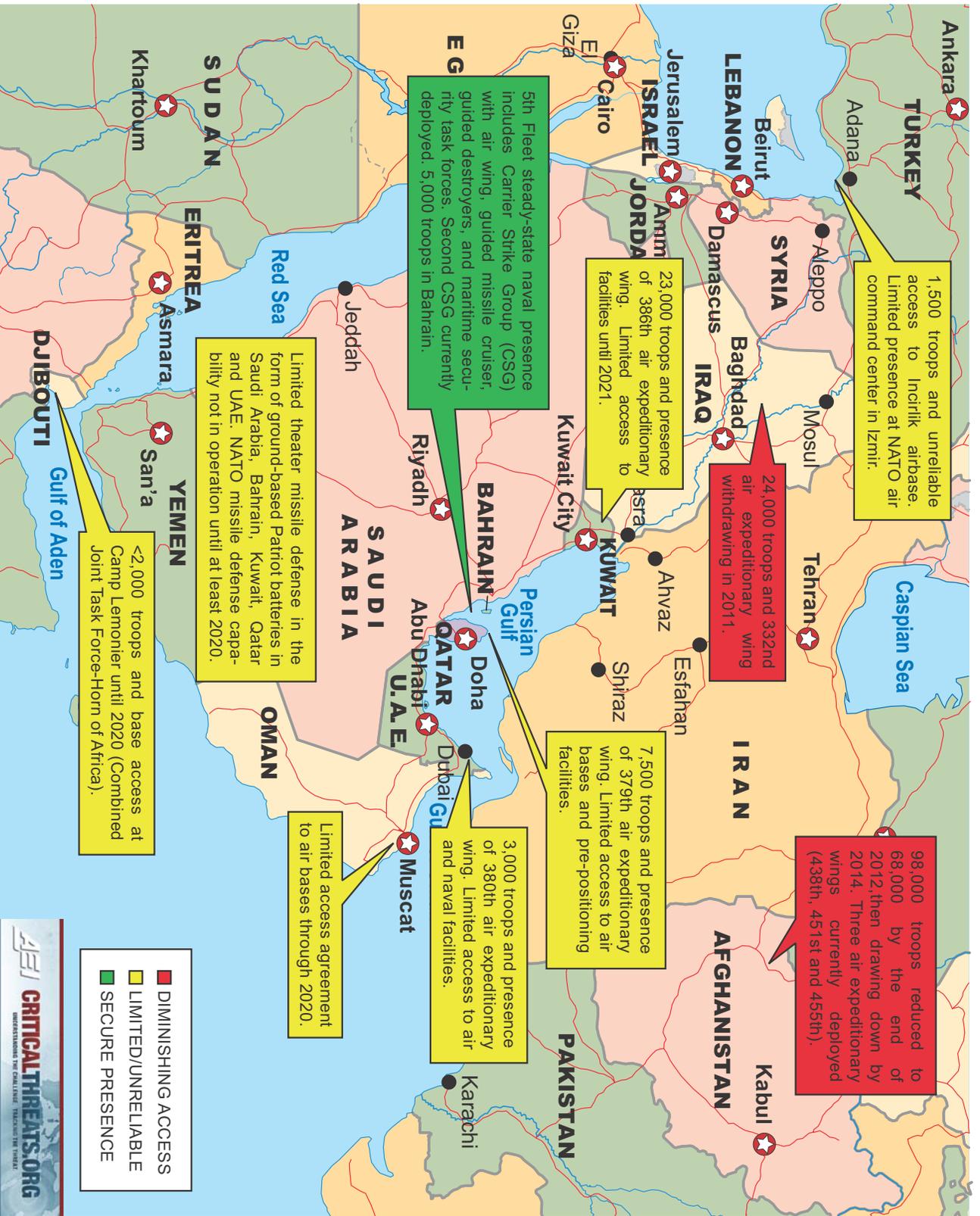
Indeed, the broad embrace of containment and deterrence appears to be based primarily on an

unwillingness to analyze the risks and costs described. It may be the case that containing and deterring is the least-bad choice. However, that does not make it a low-risk or low-cost choice. In fact, it is about to be not a choice but a fact of life.

MAP 1: THE BROADER MIDDLE EAST



MAP 2: PROBLEMS FOR CONTAINMENT: RECEDED US FORCE POSTURE¹⁴⁰



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