Iran and the Myth of Deterrence

William Wunderle
Gabriel Lajeunesse
Iran and the Myth of Deterrence

Fareed Zakaria and others who argue deterrence is the answer to a nuclear Iran miss the point -- the real issue is not whether Iran can be deterred from use or transfer of a nuclear weapon, but rather how a weapon would enable Iran to transition from its current status as a malignant spoiler to that of a true global power and threat.

This new geopolitical calculus would allow Iran to ramp up its campaign of terror and asymmetrical warfare without fear of retaliation, and would likely result in either a regional conflict or Iranian hegemony. To date, the debate about Iran has focused solely on nuclear proliferation-to garner international consensus to support action against Iran, this debate should shift toward the Iranian threat to the region, with a spotlight on historic and current examples of Iran's efforts to interfere with and destabilize its neighbors. The threat must be understood to be beyond the theoretical use of Iranian nukes against Israel that many are skeptical of, but rather one of malevolent Iranian domination of a region and peoples of vital interest to the entire world.

Iran has sponsored and trained terrorists and opposition forces from Morocco to Sudan, from Israel and Lebanon to Turkey and Azerbaijan. Iranian agents have supported attacks killing and wounding hundred of coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and are well placed to manipulate Shia populations that sit atop Saudi, Iraqi and Bahraini oil fields. Over the years, Iran has transitioned its application of asymmetrical warfare from ideological export of the revolution, to a realpolitik approach of bullying to secure regional power in support of its hegemonic aspirations. Arab perceptions of the successes of Iranian trained Hizbollah and HAMAS against Israel in its incursions into Lebanon and Gaza in 2006 and 2008/9, have increased the wasa, or clout, of Iran-winning popularity on the Arab street while amplifying the fears of Arab leaders. Additionally, though Iran may have overplayed its hand in Iraq, its training of Shia insurgents and the deadly supply of Iranian explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) demonstrated Iran's ability to take on even US forces. Iran's intelligence apparatus and low cost adventures allow it to punch way above its weight, wielding influence far beyond what an examination of military capabilities would suggest as possible.

None of this has escaped the attention of Arab leaders. Arab concerns for an emerging Shia
Crescent (from Lebanon and Syrian, across Saudi Arabia and down through the Gulf) have been well voiced, and increasing rhetoric against Iran in 2009 by Arab leaders was a sign of regional concern about the ability of the U.S. to reverse Iranian gains. Morocco expelled Iranian diplomats, Egypt made public their operations against Hizballah and Iranian agents in its country, and the Saudis and Yemenis likewise made statements about Iranian interference in their own domestic security challenges. Those who live closest to this threat fully understand the seriousness of the challenge they face—according to media reports, some Arab states, while openly urging restraint, are privately advocating for U.S. military action against Iran.

An Iran with a nuclear weapon could ramp up its efforts to solidify its global power status with impunity. After tough fights in Iraq and Afghanistan, many military leaders look at Iran with a nuclear weapon as virtually unstoppable—"game over" they believe. Those with significant Shia populations or a history of Iranian intervention are well aware of the risks posed by a nuclear Iran. These states would be forced to initiate their own preemptive response, develop a nuclear deterrent, or capitulate. Left unchecked, Robert Bear's prediction of Iranian control of all Gulf oil and subjection of the Middle East through either conquest or influence becomes a plausible reality.

While non-proliferation regimes are important, the international community's ability to contain Iran has significant implications on the future of nuclear proliferation—framing the debate in these terms has allowed people to draw parallels towards containment strategies against the USSR and North Korea. The Iranian situation is different, because the primary threat is not from proliferation but from Iran itself. Iran is already destabilizing the region in a manner which should require United Nation's response under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter; a nuclear Iran will only be emboldened.

It is time to shift the dialogue from hypotheticals about what Iran would or would not do with a bomb, to what it has and is doing to destabilize the region. Only through a shift in dialogue can the true implications of a nuclear Iran be brought into public debate. Such a debate will be an essential component of ramping up of pressure to increase international consensus toward action. Without this, Iran's march toward regional domination will continue unhindered... "stop... or I'll say stop again..."

William Wunderle is the Division Chief, Iran and Levant Division at the Joint Staff (J5). Lt Col Gabriel Lajeunesse is a Special Agent and Commander of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, Detachment 522, Incirlik Air Base, Turkey. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of the Defense.