

WMD proliferation in the Middle East: threats and challenges to security

The proliferation of WMD and ballistic missiles in the Middle East and the Mediterranean is generally considered by Western officials and analysts as a destabilising development. Indeed, in the recent past 'no issue has dominated the strategic agenda more than the proliferation of WMD'.¹ Reasons for concern include the large number of conflicts and the region's endemic instability, the fact that such weapons have been used in the past, the region's geographic proximity to Europe and the vital interests of the West (which is prepared, under certain circumstances, to use force to protect them), the unstable regimes in the region, the multiplicity of conflicts and other security problems and the general instability in the region (including the spread of religious extremism). What worries Western officials most is the confluence of WMD proliferation and the possibility of a radical Islamist take-over.

The crux of the horizontal nuclear proliferation problem has always been whether it might increase the probability of the use of nuclear weapons (although other consequences, such as destabilizing specific regions through costly and risk-prone arms races or because of shifts in regional power balances that were wrought or accelerated by WMD proliferation should not be underestimated). There has been considerable disagreement between analysts on this question for, at least, the past thirty years.

Indeed, the answers to this question range from extremely optimistic -that nuclear proliferation will result to greater regional and global stability- to extremely pessimistic -that nuclear proliferation will bring the world closer to the brink of nuclear annihilation. The author's view is that each potential NWS presents a different case that has to be examined and analyzed, always taking its particularities into consideration. It is risky and, sometimes, misleading to generalize about potential nuclear proliferators. Each country and region has its own characteristics and there are so many variables (most of which change almost continuously) that any attempt to derive a norm is difficult and, in most cases, misleading.

The deliberate use of nuclear weapons by rival new NWS is unlikely (but not impossible) today. As was shown in the analysis of Middle Eastern scenarios, a preventive strike (should one be made) would almost certainly be conventional. The only conceivable

use of nuclear weapons would be as a weapon of last resort, in the face of a conventional defeat.

If there were to be use of nuclear weapons by a new nuclear weapon state, it would most likely result from a miscalculation, an accidental detonation or launching of a nuclear device, or be an act of desperation in the crisis or conventional war. The further spread of nuclear weapons would also make it even more difficult to come to grips with the existing nuclear arms race. The larger the number and diversity of nuclear weapons states, the more difficult it could be to agree on arms control and disarmament measures. Proliferation would make the strategic chessboard more complex whilst at the same time multiplying risks and complicating strategic decision-making. The spread of nuclear weapons to three, five or ten countries in addition to the existing eight NWS would simply multiply by many times the likelihood that one or another such "unstable" leader would come to command a force of nuclear weapons, with peace therefore coming into danger. A world that depends on the psychological stability of regimes in Moscow and Washington (but also London, Paris and Beijing, Tel-Aviv, New Delhi and Islamabad) must *a priori* be considered to be comparatively safer than one which requires such rationality in all these places and in a ninth and a tenth and an nth. As Stephen Rosen argues, 'if several more small nuclear powers will coexist along with the large ones, then the problems of nuclear deterrence, arms races, offensive and defensive weaponry, and appropriate retaliation will need to be worked out again in new and more complex conditions.'²

It should be noted, however, that a single case of counterproliferation action or the use of missile defences could change the picture in a dramatic way. In the same way, a single case of use of NBC weapons (by a state or terrorist group) would radically transform the situation. It is correctly pointed out that 'answers from today's perspective may differ from the day after perspectives that is, if in fact WMD had already been used against the U.S. or American forces or allies with many thousands of casualties, would leaders and the public have a different perspective on the advisability and the desirability of action?'³

Another extremely important issue will be the international community's response to the next significant use of NBC weapons. When Iran and Iraq used chemical weapons against each other in the 1980s, the international community was virtually silent. As Ellis observes, 'to prevent further use, key states and international

organizations will have to take appropriate punitive measures or risk an eradicated norm of nonuse on the years ahead.⁴ Shaping the post-use strategic environment will be a critical task for the great powers.

Moving from the abstract to the specific, dealing with Iran's nuclear programme is probably the most critical strategic question in the proliferation field today. Iran's nuclear programme, dating from the time of the Shah, is motivated, among other, by some legitimate security concerns. Although military action would probably not solve any problems,⁵ but rather create new ones, failure to take any action may lead to a "domino effect" in the region and deal a fatal blow to the international nonproliferation regime. A nuclear Iran could serve as a "tipping point" for some states in their thinking about acquiring a nuclear capability, though it is possible that key states in the region could learn to live with this outcome. Many analysts predict that a cascade of WMD proliferation, especially regarding nuclear weapons, could lead to a strong incentive for prominent non-nuclear countries, such as Germany and Japan, to 'go nuclear', and indeed could have sparked vertical nuclear-weapon build-ups by established powers. This would have represented a relative decline in American primacy and, thereby, facilitated the rise of a future near-peer competitor.⁶

It has been argued that even armed with nuclear weapons, Iran will not necessarily be hostile to U.S. interests, and the U.S. should not necessarily treat a nuclear-armed Iran as an enemy. Whether a nuclear-armed Iran is a danger to the U.S. and its interests⁷ depends on Iranian threat perceptions and the progress of internal reform. A cautious, moderate Iran armed with nuclear weapons may even be an improvement over the *status quo*. However, the Bush administration sees Iran's nuclear programme from a different perspective and if sanctions do not work, it cannot be ruled out that the U.S. (and/or Israel) will undertake unilateral military action, with uncertain results regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, but with assured negative political and economic consequences for the region and the world in general. At the same time, failure to take any action against the Iranian nuclear programme may lead to a "domino effect" in the region and constitute a severe or fatal blow to the international nonproliferation regime.

Perhaps the adoption of a 'nuclear weapons in the basement' policy by Iran would be an acceptable solution for all parties involved. Under such a scenario, Iran would proceed very slowly to the eventual acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability, without

openly crossing the nuclear threshold. Thus, the Iranian regime would be able to declare to its domestic audience that it did not yield to U.S. pressure, and to appear internationally as a responsible power. At the same time, any existential threat to Israel's security would not materialize for a long time, allowing for the use of political, diplomatic and economic tools to address the problem. Such an option might also contribute to the prevention of a 'domino' scenario, as other regional countries might perceive the threat as less immediate. Unfortunately, the lack of trust and the limited channels of communication between Iran and the Western powers reduce the likelihood of an agreement according to the above line of logic.

The use of military force to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons should be among Europe's options, albeit a last resort one. However, it will probably not work in the case of Iran.⁸ The only rational, and potentially effective, course of action for Europe would be:

- (a) to convince the U.S. to must recognize that Iranian proliferation, Persian Gulf security, the U.S. role in the Middle East, Israel's nuclear status, and Palestinian-Israeli relations are all linked and cannot be resolved without a more balanced U.S. stance;⁹
- (b) to assist in the development of a new security system in the Gulf region which will take under consideration Iranian, but also GCC and Iraqi security concerns. To achieve this, 'the transatlantic allies must now come up with a new game plan, involving both Russia and China'.¹⁰

But ultimately, the key to a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis is the normalization of U.S.-Iranian relations (which would also greatly facilitate the stabilization of Iraq). But to achieve this, it "takes two to tango". And unfortunately, the EU is not one of them.

Managing proliferation: options for NATO and the EU

It is often argued that since 9/11 the rules have changed. The short- and long-term consequences of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the U.S. on relations between the EU (and the Western world in general) and the Arab/Islamic world, as well as on perceptions between the two sides, are expected to be far-reaching. However, because of the many uncertainties at this stage of transition, the new patterns of behaviour and unpredictable regional dynamics, a prognosis and accurate

assessment of consequences would be extremely difficult. Regarding the proliferation of WMD, there is in some circles widespread concern that the calculus of incentives and disincentives has shifted during the past decade, with incentives increasing and disincentives declining.¹¹ Although the number of nuclear proliferants remains limited, it might be prudent to start thinking about shaping, or at least managing the postproliferation future.

Even if the use of military force is not the best option to deal with the Iranian nuclear crisis, there may be other nuclear crises in the future in which the use of military force may be the best or perhaps the only option. To resolve problems of legitimacy that a unilateral counterproliferation action will entail, criteria, rules and procedures for an internationally sanctioned preventive action should have been agreed well before any nuclear crisis erupts. According to the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change,

In the world of the 21st century, the international community does have to be concerned about nightmare scenarios combining terrorists, WMD and irresponsible States, and much more besides, which may conceivably justify the use of force, not just reactively but preventively and before a latent threat becomes imminent. The question is not whether such action can be taken: it can, by the Security Council as the international community's collective security voice, at any time it deems that there is a threat to international peace and security. The Council may well need to be prepared to be much more proactive on these issues, taking more decisive action earlier, than it has been in the past.¹²

As George Perkinson points out, 'leaders as diverse as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan have called for an international initiative to establish guidelines for possible military action against grave but non-imminent threats. Without such guidelines, Kissinger warns, the world could become increasingly chaotic, with numerous countries embarking on preventive military campaigns justified by a variety of individual standards.'¹³ The only appropriate forum

for negotiating such guidelines would be the UN Security Council, despite its considerable dysfunctionalities. It is safe to assume, however, that it will be very difficult -although not necessarily impossible- for members of the Security Council and other great powers to agree on the need and criteria to act when the threat is not imminent. It will be easier to agree on preconditions for CP action when there is unambiguous and present threat to national, regional or global security. It will be very difficult to convince the international community by using rather shaky arguments of the type 'perhaps, if this happens, possibly...under certain circumstances country X may consider the eventual use of WMD' and therefore we need to use force against that country to prevent a future threat.

One could envisage various scenarios of conflicts with potential proliferators in the Mediterranean. However, missile arsenals in the region are limited in both quality and quantity. The "missile threat" today is limited geographically to Southern Europe. Potential opponents in the Middle East and North Africa do not yet possess the capability to strike NATO/EU countries' territory beyond Southern Italy, Southern Greece, and a significant part of Turkey (except, of course, by terrorist attacks). For at least the next ten years, their missile arsenals will continue to consist mainly of Frogs, Scuds or Scud derivatives. Even for those countries, it seems that the threat of massive conventional (or nuclear by NATO capabilities) retaliation and the limited NBC and missile capabilities of proliferant countries make it highly unlikely that such weapons would be used against the populations of NATO member states. [It is possible, however, that, under certain circumstances, they could be used against NATO theatre or power projection forces.] The threat of NBC use against European territories, thus, should not be conceived of as an immediate or short-term threat, but as a mid- to long-term one. In analysing threat scenarios, one must remain realistic and keep in mind that in most cases these are worst-case scenarios and that there probably are active political and economic measures to prevent such scenarios from being realized.

The number of active proliferators and their technological capabilities remain limited. It should, however, be noted that within the overall proliferation trend the NBC capabilities of proliferants may have advanced significantly, particularly if abetted by the purchase or illicit transfer of weapons, delivery systems and related technologies. The foreign assistance aspect is an incalculable variable. Furthermore, there is

considerable uncertainty about the political stability of several regimes in the region, which are faced with strong internal challenges, mainly from radical Islamic groups.

In this context, one should recall that the principal non-proliferation goal of NATO is defined as 'to prevent proliferation from occurring or, should it occur, to reverse it through diplomatic means'. Should these means fail to achieve this objective, the use of military means might be considered as part of the Alliance's overall response to a specific crisis involving the use of weapons of mass destruction. To this end, NATO must maintain a range of capabilities needed to discourage NBC weapons proliferation and use and to protect NATO territory, populations and forces against such use. In some cases counterproliferation capabilities may be more useful as a "stick", preferably in combination with some "carrots", rather as an actual policy instrument.

Transatlantic cooperation will be a critical factor in managing NBC weapons proliferation. There are some problems in security co-operation between Europe and the U.S. For example, it is argued that not only do U.S. and European policy-makers lack a shared view of what the threats to Mediterranean security are, they also lack an effective and co-ordinated strategy to deal with the spectrum of possible security challenges that could emerge across the region. It is also argued that there is no transatlantic consensus on the role of military force in coping with the problems of the Greater Middle East. September 11, 2001 has widened a transatlantic gap that opened years ago in the way Americans and Europeans view the international system.¹⁴ Furthermore, extensive research by the Atlantic Council of the United States concluded that 'the most pervasive differences in threat perception across the Atlantic derive from a different weighting of technological capabilities as opposed to political intentions'. This greater reliance on political intent also generates a preference for deploying diplomatic, rather than military responses when threats are seen to exist.¹⁵

There are a number of measures and initiatives that NATO, the EU and the West in general could undertake in order to improve the prospects for security and stability in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, their relations with the regional countries, as well as their capability to face the NBC proliferation threat. The following list is, of course, not comprehensive:

- (a) NATO and the EU are faced with a range of threats and potential threats that are multi-directional, multi-dimensional and highly unpredictable. In this context, better co-ordination between the two main initiatives, those of the EU and NATO, directed

at the Mediterranean is essential to ensure that their approaches are complementary and mutually reinforcing¹⁶ The U.S. and Europe need to develop effective crisis management capabilities to cope with crises in the region. Close consultations between allies during a crisis will also be critical;

- (b) The best means for preventing many future crises in the Mediterranean is to address their root causes, which are primarily economic and social -ahead of time.¹⁷ The EU is the actor which is best placed to deal with these problems and ensure that they do not escalate into major crises requiring military action.¹⁸ Furthermore, the European states' relations with countries on the southern rim of the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the former Soviet Republics should continue to address essential political, economic, social and development issues rather than being expressed in alarmist military-security terms;
- (c) The fight against WMD proliferation is a global challenge, requiring, among other, a more comprehensive and less unilateral U.S. approach and a more coherent European policy. Especially for the latter, although the Europeans should avoid overestimating the proliferation threat, they cannot afford to remain completely exposed and unprotected.
- (d) Because proliferation has expanded to a number of regional actors, a single strategy is unlikely to be sufficient in deterring states with varied motivations, and social, economic, religious, cultural and political backgrounds. Each case should be carefully evaluated on its own merits and policy planners should, therefore, prepare country-specific strategies;¹⁹
- (e) Whereas military preparations as an option of last resort may be necessary, the emphasis should be on traditional nonproliferation methods. Nuclear weapons remain important for deterrence but should not play a primary role in counterproliferation efforts because of the operational problems and the political inhibitions analysed in previous chapters. The emphasis of NATO and U.S. efforts should be on the development of necessary conventional technologies and theatre missile defences, not on preventive/pre-emptive attack. A TMD for Europe must be developed together with other forms of CP, joined to non-proliferation measures and as a complement to conventional and nuclear deterrence. However, TMD deployment should not be regarded as a panacea, only as an effective first step toward strengthening regional deterrence;²⁰

(f) The possibility of nuclear terrorism has been mentioned by many analysts as one of the gravest dangers of the future. Preventing non-state actors from gaining access to WMD should constitute a high priority for Western countries and, indeed, the whole international community. What can be done to keep the threat of NBC terrorism as low as possible? Probably the biggest hole in the massive effort to prepare for and counter NBC terrorism in the 21st century is ignorance about the psychology of terrorists and what would motivate them to use or refrain from using these dreadful weapons.²¹ Preparation is also necessary for dealing with the consequences of NBC terrorism.

There can be little doubt that WMD proliferation is of the most critical strategic challenges for the 21st century and dealing with its consequences should be a matter of high priority. It will probably be more difficult to agree on issues such as authorization and legitimacy of action, the division of labour and the modalities of great power cooperation. Victor Utgoff makes the interesting point that 'the world needs at least one state, preferably several, willing and able to play the role of sheriff, or to be members of a sheriff's posse, even in the face of nuclear threats.'²² One should make sure, however, that the Sheriff's deputies do not include any Dr. Strangeloves and apprentice sorcerers.

REFERENCES

¹ Nicole Gnesotto in Gustav Lindstrom & Burkard Schmitt (eds.), *Fighting Proliferation - European Perspectives*, Chaillot Papers, no. 66, EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris, December 2003, p. 5.

² Stephen Peter Rosen, 'After Proliferation', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2006, p. 14.

³ M. Elaine Bunn, "Pre-emptive Action: When, How, and to What Effect?", *Strategic Forum* No. 200, July 2003, p. 15.

⁴ Jason Ellis, "The Best Defense: Counterproliferation and U.S. National Security", *The Washington Quarterly*, 26:2, Spring 2003, p. 130.

⁵ Ian Lesser rightly points out that with the situation in Iraq still unresolved, there will be few enthusiasts for a more ambitious campaign aimed at driving the religious establishment from power. The military option, if chosen, would be driven by narrower security interests; at base, the belief that a nuclear armed Iran cannot be accommodated. (Ian Lesser, *Security and Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean*, ELIAMEP Policy Paper no. 5, Athens, 2005, pp. 5-6)

⁶ David McDonough, *Nuclear Superiority. The 'New Triad' and the Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, Adelphi Paper 383, IISS, London, 2006, p. 33; see also, Campbell, Einhorn & Reiss, *The Nuclear Tipping Point. Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2004.

⁷ The U.S. has four national interests that could be jeopardized by a nuclear-armed Iran with long-range means of delivery: preserving the safety of U.S. territory, retaining the ability to use U.S. conventional forces freely in the Middle East, sustaining nonproliferation regimes, and

maintaining the willingness of allies and friends to work in coalition with the U.S. The degree of effect depends on how Iran behaves once it is a nuclear state. This analysis is premised on the assumption that the U.S. cannot prevent Iran from developing NW without incurring prohibitively high political and diplomatic costs, especially while Iran's domestic politics are in flux. A second assumption is that Iran's domestic circumstances are likely to remain unclear for a long time. (*The Strategic Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, McNair Paper 64, National Defense University, Washington D.C., 2001, pp. 52 & 58)

⁸ Gareth Evans is in favour of abandoning the 'zero enrichment' goal in favour of a 'delayed limited enrichment, arguing that the wider international community would explicitly accept that Iran can enrich uranium domestically for peaceful nuclear energy purposes. In return, Iran would agree to phasing in that enrichment programme over an extended period of years, with major limitations on its initial size and scope, and a highly intrusive inspections regime. (Gareth Evans, 'It's Not Too Late to Stop Iran's Bomb', *International Herald Tribune*, 16 February 2007)

⁹ George Perkovich, 'Iran Is Not an Island: A Strategy to Mobilize the Neighbors', *Policy Brief* No. 34, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C., February 2005, p. 1; As Iranians often point out that any nuclear deal could be irrelevant or even dangerous without U.S. involvement. They see the need for a 'grand bargain' to resolve all outstanding questions. (Walter Posch in *Iranian Challenges*, Chaillot Paper no. 89, EU-ISS, Paris, 2006, p. 108)

¹⁰ Mark Fitzpatrick, 'Weapons Watch', *The World Today*, February 2006, p. 10; It has been argued, however, that the U.S. can expect only limited help from Russia and China in advancing its combating WMD and counter-terrorism agendas. (*The Future Nuclear Landscape: New Realities, New Responses*, Center of the Study of WMD, National Defense University, 2006 Annual Symposium, Washington D.C., 2006, p. 4)

¹¹ 'New threats have arisen while the nuclear taboo was weakened. And it is not just a single factor in this new strategic landscape that gives pause. Rather, it is the accumulation of multiple factors and their interplay and mutual reinforcement that account for many of these new dangers. For instance, there have always been terrorist groups, but never before has there been the simultaneous concentration of terrorist groups, diffusion of bomb design information, and poorly secured or unaccounted for nuclear material from the former Soviet Union.' (Campbell, Einhorn & Reiss, *The Nuclear Tipping Point*, p. 13)

¹² Terzuolo, *NATO and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, p. 150.

¹³ George Perkovich et. al., *Universal Compliance. A Strategy for Nuclear Security*, Carnegie Endowment, Washington D.C., June 2004, p. 38.

¹⁴ According to Jessica Mathews, 'this is one of the most significant, as well as least expected, results of the attacks. Long before September 11, Europeans had become concerned about the American "hyperpower" and what appeared to them a growing tendency toward unilateral action and a disregard for international laws and institutions. Americans were beginning to doubt Europe's strategic relevance and to wonder whether it could help the U.S. at all in preserving international security.' (Jessica Mathews, 'September 11, One Year Later A World of Change', *Policy Brief* No. 18, Carnegie Endowment, Washington D.C. 2002, p. 8)

¹⁵ Mark Smith, 'European Perspectives on Ballistic Missile Proliferation and Missile Defences', in *Missile Proliferation and Defences: Problems and Prospects*, Center for NonProliferation Studies & Mountbatten Centre for International Studies, Occasional Paper No. 7, Monterey, 2001, p. 72; As Eric Terzuolo put it, 'the largest divergence between the European and American strategic outlooks is over the role of military force.' (Terzuolo, *NATO and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, p. 173); Also, the combination of U.S. unilateralism and a tendency to use military clout abroad for domestic political purposes will make Europeans wary about signing up to a CP policy over which they would have little control. (Elizabeth Young, 'CP and the Militarisation of U.S. Policy', Letters to the Editor, *Survival*, Summer 1996)

¹⁶ Nicola de Santis, 'The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Initiative', *NATO Review*, Spring 1998, p. 33.

¹⁷ Thomas Barnett divides the world into the 'Functioning Core' and the 'Disconnected Gap' and speaks of the urgent need to 'shrink the Gap' (see his very interesting book *The Pentagon's New Map. War and Peace in the 21st Century*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 2004).

¹⁸ Ian Lesser & Ashley Tellis, *Strategic Exposure: Proliferation Around the Mediterranean*, RAND, Santa Monica, 1996, p. 30.

¹⁹ Jerome Kahan, *Regional Deterrence Strategies for New Proliferation Threat*, Strategic Forum no. 70, INSS/National Defense University, April 1996, p. 1.

²⁰ Missile defence is unlikely to revolutionize the strategic environment or render offensive weapons obsolete, nor is it expected to have a fundamental impact on the strategic calculus of the U.S. and its allies. (Ivo Daalder, *Missile Defenses: The Case for a Limited Insurance Defense*, Paper Prepared for the CEPS/IISS European Strategy Forum Meeting, Brussels, April 2, 2001, p. 5)

²¹ Jerrold Post & Ehud Sprinzak, 'Searching For: Why Haven't Terrorists Used Weapons of Mass Destruction?', *Armed Forces Journal International*, April 1998, p. 16.

²² Derek Smith, *Deterring America. Rogue States and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 12.