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No room for Israel under America's umbrella

By Max Boot

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Now that the [war in Gaza](#) is over, Israeli and American leaders must turn their attention from Hamas to the larger threat from its backers in Tehran. A report in Haaretz, Israel's leading newspaper, suggests that the Obama team may consider extending the US nuclear umbrella to Israel in the event that Iran goes nuclear. This idea was floated in April by columnist Charles Krauthammer and picked up by Hillary Clinton, who declared when she was still a presidential candidate that if Iran attacked Israel, "We would be able to totally obliterate them."

Such tough talk may make us feel good, but it should not be mistaken for a solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis. It is not clear what purpose a US nuclear threat would serve, since Israel has its own nuclear arsenal, estimated to contain 100-200 warheads. That is enough to "totally obliterate" Iran.

This Israeli deterrent is more credible than any US threat. It is unrealistic to assume that, in the event of an Iranian attack on Israel, a US president would kill innocent Iranians. The chance of US action lessens if you consider how an Iranian warhead would be delivered. A strike employing Iran's Shahab-3 missiles is the least likely delivery method as it can be traced back to its return address even before it lands. Harder to trace, and more likely to be used, would be a portable nuclear device set off by terrorists. The US would be forced to contemplate retaliation based on murky intelligence. We know where that led us in Iraq. Would President Barack Obama risk nuclear war based on intelligence that could be equally faulty?

Even if we assume that the US could create a credible nuclear deterrent against Iran, that hardly means we could breathe easily. During the cold war the two superpowers came perilously close to nuclear conflict on at least two occasions; not only during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis but also during Nato's 1983 "Able Archer" exercise, which some in the Kremlin misread as preparations for an actual first strike. Such miscalculations are even more likely when dealing with Iran's isolated, fanatical and paranoid leaders.

Even if nuclear weapons are never used, their very possession can be destabilising. Shielded by its nuclear arsenal, the Soviet Union was able to dominate eastern Europe, invade Afghanistan and back proxies who waged costly wars in Korea and Vietnam. The Kremlin was able to act so aggressively at least in part because the US had no effective military options against a nuclear-armed superpower.

Pakistan has operated with similar recklessness since testing its first nuclear weapons in 1998. In 1999 its army increased its infiltrations of Kashmir, sparking a low-level conflict with India that could have spun out of control. Pakistan has also proliferated its technology, with the A.Q. Khan ring providing nuclear know-how to such states as Iran and North Korea.

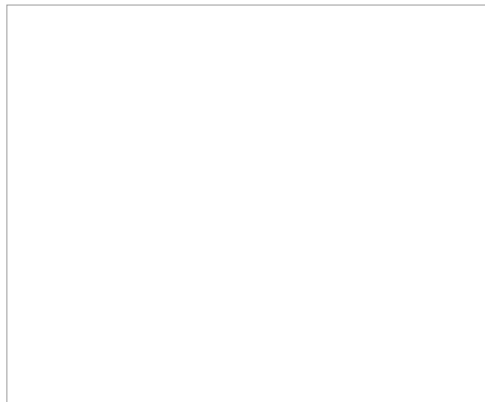
As Stanford's Scott Sagan notes, Pakistan offers a more apt analogy for the Iranian nuclear programme than the Soviet Union. Iran, like Pakistan, is a militantly Islamic state that has close links to terrorist groups. With nuclear weapons in its possession, it is likely the mullahs would be emboldened to step up their already substantial support for terrorism. They might also be tempted to share nuclear secrets with allied states such as Syria or even with sub-state groups such as Hizbollah.

Iran's neighbours are already terrified by its presumed designs to dominate the region. Tehran's possession of nuclear weapons would increase their fears and could lead such states as Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates to acquire their own atomic arsenals. Some suggest that the US could prevent that by extending its nuclear umbrella not only to Israel but to these other countries. That strategy worked with South Korea, West Germany and Japan, but in all three the US guarantee was backed by large numbers of US troops. Since there are few US troops stationed in most Middle Eastern countries, their leaders would have cause to doubt the sincerity of any US pledge to risk nuclear war on their behalf.

Rather than planning for what happens after Iran acquires nuclear weapons, we need to concentrate on what we can do to prevent it. Talking about how we deter a nuclear Iran suggests we have already accepted it into the club. That is the last message we want to send – it could be self-fulfilling.

The writer is the Jeane J. Kirkpatrick senior fellow in National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and author, most recently, of 'War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History, 1500 to Today'

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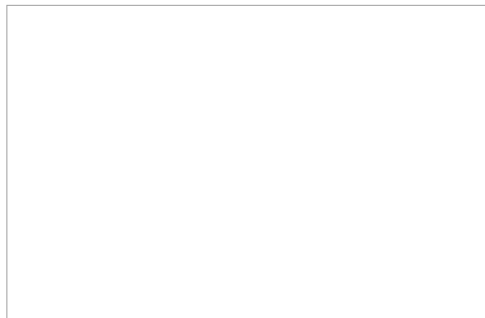
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