



Washington's Fading Faith in Deterrence

Ted Galen Carpenter - U.S. and the World - 12/3/2012

Deterrence and containment were the twin pillars of U.S. security policy in the decades after World War II. Containment eventually played out much as the doctrine's principal author, George Kennan, believed that it would, with the transformation or collapse of the Soviet Union. And despite a few perilous moments, especially the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, deterrence also worked. Throughout the Cold War, U.S. leaders remained confident that the vast American strategic nuclear arsenal would not only deter Moscow from attacking the United States, but also from menacing a growing network of U.S. allies in Europe and East Asia.

A striking feature of the post-Cold War period is the bi-furcated perception in the U.S. policy community about the utility of either containment or deterrence. On the one hand, the expansion of NATO suggests that Washington has more confidence than ever in the efficacy of deterrence. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which proclaims that an attack on one member is an attack on all, intimately links America's security to every other treaty signatory, no matter how small or vulnerable that ally might be. With the second stage of expansion in 2004, that aspect was not merely an academic matter, since the new members included the former Soviet republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—countries that were on poor terms with their large, nuclear-armed Russian neighbor. Washington was literally putting America's existence on the line, betting that the U.S. security guarantee and military power would deter Moscow from committing aggression against those small, weak countries.

Yet while U.S. leaders seem hyper-confident about the continued relevance of deterrence in Europe—and in East Asia where Washington still provides security guarantees to Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and other partners—the opposite attitude has taken place regarding the Muslim world. There, American officials and much of the political and policy elites appear to have little confidence that the principles of deterrence (or containment) have any validity.

That weakened confidence in those venerable pillars of U.S. security policy is most evident in the response to Iran's nuclear program. A resolution is pending in the U.S. Senate admonishing the executive branch not to consider containment as an option for dealing with a nuclear-armed Iran. Both President Obama and his GOP challengers (except for Ron Paul) insist that it is utterly unacceptable for Iran to have such weapons,

and that “all options,” including military force, remain on the table to prevent Tehran from achieving a capability to build nuclear weapons, much less actually deploying an arsenal.

But it would be a mistake to assume that this loss of faith in deterrence and containment applies only to the Iran issue. Indeed, George W. Bush’s administration exhibited a pronounced lack of confidence in containment or deterrence in its dealings with Saddam Hussein. The centerpiece of the administration’s case for war against Iraq was that Baghdad had “weapons of mass destruction,” meaning chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons. Administration officials used the WMD term as an implicit synonym for nuclear weapons, despite no credible evidence that Iraq had any such capability. The fear mongering reached its zenith with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice’s dire warning that the United States could not wait for the “smoking gun” of a security threat to take the form “of a mushroom cloud.”

The Bush administration’s argument was not merely that Saddam might pose a threat to Israel or other U.S. allies in the Middle East, but to the American homeland. There was considerable publicity, for example, about an alleged Iraqi plot to put WMD warheads on board “unmanned aerial vehicles” to attack American targets. Like so much of the supposed Iraq WMD threat, the unmanned aerial vehicles turned out to be illusory. Those delivery systems consisted of a few primitive balsa wood gliders.

It is puzzling that U.S. officials apparently believe that a strategic nuclear arsenal of several thousand bombs and warheads, which successfully deterred the USSR (and Maoist China), not to mention a conventional military vastly superior to any competitor’s, is incapable of deterring the likes of Iran or Saddam’s Iraq. That lack of faith in deterrence was already a contributing factor to the onset of one war, and it increases the likelihood of another.

Several factors seem to be at work. One is the emotional trauma caused by the 9/11 terrorist attack. Policy makers have conjured up nightmares of a future nuclear version of such an attack on an American city, which would mean tens or hundreds of thousands of casualties. That fear has some validity, since deterrence theory is based on the threat of massive retaliation against an aggressor. But since non-state terrorists have no clear “return address” for a retaliatory strike, deterrence is less likely to work against such an adversary.

The next link in the chain of logic is that a rogue regime might give a nuclear weapon to a terrorist group. But that’s where the logic breaks down. Even the most rabidly anti-American regime would be courting suicide to give such a weapon to a terrorist client, because it would risk bringing massive U.S. retaliation against the offending country. And the list of suspects for supplying the terrorist weapon would be a short one.

But the loss of confidence in deterrence, especially with respect to Iran, goes beyond the fear that a rogue regime might pass on a nuclear weapon to al Qaeda or a similar group. A significant portion of the American political elite seems to believe that the Iranian regime is suicidal on two levels. One worry is that Tehran might give a nuclear weapon to Hezbollah or another terrorist client, but the other fear is that Iran might attack Israel or the United States directly. The latter worry is even more far-fetched than the transfer of nukes to terrorists scenario. Israel has between 150 and 300 nuclear

weapons and a secure capability to launch a retaliatory attack. And of course, the U.S. nuclear arsenal utterly dwarfs anything that Iran could hope to deploy.

Such nightmarish specters are based on an implicit assumption that the Iranian clerical leadership (and perhaps Islamist ideology in general) is irrational to the point of being suicidal. There is a dearth of evidence of such irrationality on the part of Iran's political elite, but the dominant thinking to the contrary in the United States is increasing the likelihood of a preventive war against Iran. Before Washington proceeds down such a perilous path, U.S. policy makers need to re-examine the dubious assumption that deterrence would not work against Iran. If they do, they will find that the notion that Tehran can't be deterred is as fallacious as the "threat" posed by Saddam Hussein's phantom weapons of mass destruction.