

Conceptualizing Containment: The Iranian Threat and the Future of Gulf Security

ZACHARY K. GOLDMAN
MIRA RAPP-HOOPER

“MAKE NO MISTAKE,” DECLARED U.S. PRESIDENT Barack Obama before the 2012 session of the United Nations General Assembly, “a nuclear-armed Iran is not a challenge that can be contained.”¹ In his Senate confirmation hearing, Secretary of State John Kerry echoed that sentiment: “We will do what we must do to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and I repeat here today, our policy is not containment. It is prevention....”² As part of his confirmation process as Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel was

¹“President Obama’s 2012 Address to UN General Assembly (Full Text),” 25 September 2013, accessed at http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-09-25/politics/35497281_1_libyan-people-benghazi-diplomatic-facilities, 25 February, 2013.

²Joe Sterling, Jessica Yellin, and Hollya Yan, “Kerry Says Iran Must Come Clean on Nuclear Program,” 25 January 2013, accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/24/politics/kerry-nomination/index.html>, 24 February 2013.

ZACHARY K. GOLDMAN is the Executive Director of the Center on Law and Security. He has previously served as a policy advisor in the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes, and as a Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His publications have appeared in *Cold War History*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic*, *The Diplomat*, *The National Interest*, and others.

MIRA RAPP-HOOPER is a doctoral candidate in political science at Columbia University and a Stanton Nuclear Security fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Her dissertation, “Absolute Alliances: Signaling Security Guarantees in International Politics,” analyzes the formation and management of nuclear umbrella pacts. Mira’s writings have appeared in *Survival*, *The Atlantic*, *The Diplomat*, *Strategic Asia*, and others.

also asked to rule out containment as an option for dealing with a potentially nuclear-capable Iran.³ The reasons for this containment phobia are not difficult to divine: It would be politically unpalatable, both domestically and in the eyes of international partners such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, for the President or any of his closest advisers to suggest that the United States was making plans to “live with” a nuclear Iran by discussing plans to contain the Islamic Republic.

But despite their public opposition to containing Iran, as the nuclear standoff has continued, U.S. officials have hedged their bets, striving to deepen security ties with the six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) in order to strengthen regional security and prepare for future contingencies. In advance of a September 2011 meeting with the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated that the Council was “emerging as an increasingly critical partner to advancing our common interests,” and he impressed upon his counterparts the importance of a stronger Gulf security architecture.⁴ At the inaugural session of the U.S.–GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum in March 2012, then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton declared that the United States was “committed to defending the Gulf nations and we want it to be as effective as possible.”⁵

Word has also been met with deed, as the United States has vastly increased arms sales to the states of the region, including F-15 and F-16 aircraft, radar and anti-missile systems, and satellite-guided bombs. Washington has also attempted to create a missile defense architecture for the region.⁶ Most recently, in April 2013, the administration of Barack Obama publicized its decision to sell additional advanced fighter aircraft and sophisticated long-range missiles to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, as well as its provision of refueling aircraft and V-22 Ospreys

³“Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly,” 25 September 2012, accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25/remarks-president-un-general-assembly>, 24 February 2013; “Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference,” 4 March 2012, accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference-0>, 22 February 2013; Jennifer Steinhauer, “Hagel to Meet Schumer to Discuss Policy Issues,” *The New York Times*, 13 January 2013.

⁴Karen Parrish, “Clinton, Panetta to Meet with Gulf Council Ministers,” *American Forces Press Services*, 22 September 2012, accessed at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=65431>, 24 February 2013.

⁵Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal,” Gulf Cooperation Council Secretariat, 31 March 2012, accessed at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/03/187245.htm>, 23 February 2013.

⁶“US Arms to Gulf Allies Hint of Strategy,” 16 December 2012, accessed at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/dec/16/us-arms-to-gulf-allies-hint-of-strategy/?page=all#pagebreak>, 22 February 2013.

to Israel.⁷ Some of these sales were designed to bolster bilateral defense ties; others were aimed at coaxing the states of the region to adopt a more-integrated defense posture. Nonetheless, all had the same objective: the containment of Iran, defined as U.S. efforts to limit its regional influence. Despite the rhetoric to the contrary, therefore, containment is well under way. In light of these efforts, this article outlines a number of different potential scenarios in which a regime designed to contain Iran might be useful. But as we will demonstrate, containment does not automatically mean a decision to “live with” a nuclear Iran, and may require more of U.S. partners in the Gulf than they are able to deliver.

There are two important sets of reasons that any analysis of a potential containment regime must include a discussion of the role of Gulf partners, whether or not Iran goes nuclear. First, and most directly, the Gulf states are Iran’s neighbors, and along with Iraq, form the security system of which Iran is a part. The Gulf Cooperation Council was established in 1981 largely as a response to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980, and the security posture and foreign policies of the GCC states since then have been determined in part by the ebb and flow of their relationships with Iran.⁸ These states have complicated, multi-faceted relationships with the Islamic Republic.⁹ They will react to changes in Iran’s security posture, whether it acquires the bomb or stops short of that threshold. The reactions of the Gulf states must, therefore, be accounted for in American thinking about the future security of the region. And while the United States and its partners have also begun to undertake containment efforts outside of the Arabian Peninsula, for example against Hamas and Hezbollah in the Levant, the core of Iran’s military, intelligence, and sub-conventional power projection capabilities remain rooted in the Gulf. Any attempt to significantly limit Iranian influence must be directed at the region in which it maintains its most potent strengths and highly valued assets.

Second, the United States already has a large network of military bases and pre-positioned military equipment in the Gulf, as well as strong pre-

⁷Robert Burns and Donna Cassata, “US Finalizing \$10 Billion Sale of Weapons, Warplanes to Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE,” *The Associated Press*, 19 April 2013, accessed at <http://www.startribune.com/nation/203776731.html?refer=y>, 8 May 2013.

⁸Neil Partrick, “The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation,” The London School of Economics Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance, and Globalisation in the Gulf States, Research Paper No. 19, November 2011, 5.

⁹Asma Alsharif and Agnus McDowall, “Saudi Prince Turki Urges Nuclear Option After Iran,” 6 December 2011, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/06/nuclear-saudi-idAFL5E7N62G920111206>, 21 February 2013.

existing relationships with Gulf countries, which form the core of current (and future) efforts to contain Iran. This massive extant military infrastructure provides another set of reasons that Gulf states will play an essential role in efforts to contain Iran. Indeed, the United States already makes use of critical base and port facilities for the Army, Navy, and Air Force in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, and has strong military and intelligence relationships with Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ Beyond that, both Bahrain and the UAE have troops fighting with the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.¹¹ In addition, as noted above, U.S. officials have suggested that the GCC organization itself may supply an embryonic skeleton for any future regional security structure that could be used to contain the threat posed by a potentially nuclear Iran.¹² If, therefore, the United States were to consider constructing a security architecture in the Middle East in order to contain an evolving Iranian threat, the Gulf Cooperation Council would be a logical place to start, since working through an existing multilateral organization rather than relying on new institutions could be more efficient and effective. Some policy analysts, and indeed some government officials, have already gone as far as to suggest that the GCC could serve as the NATO of the Persian Gulf,¹³ making an evaluation of the viability of such a possibility important.

Despite the opposition that the American political leadership has voiced to a policy of containment, there is an active debate within the academic and policy commentary communities regarding whether the United States and its allies can contain Iran.¹⁴ But in all of the discussion of these issues,

¹⁰United States Central Command (CENTCOM), "Senate Armed Services Committee Statement of General David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army, Commander U.S. Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Strategic Review and the Posture of U.S. Central Command," 1 April 2009, accessed at <http://www.centcom.mil/qatar>, 23 February 2013; Ben Piven, "Map: U.S. Bases Encircle Iran," 1 May 2012, accessed at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2012/04/2012417131242767298.html>, 27 April 2013.

¹¹"Troop Numbers and Contributions," International Security Assistance Force, accessed at <http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php>, 24 February 2013.

¹²See also: Clark Murdoch and Jessica Yeats, "Exploring the Nuclear Posture Implications of Extended Deterrence and Assurance: Workshop Proceedings and Key Takeaways," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2009, 57; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Security in the Persian Gulf: New Frameworks for the Twenty-First Century," *Middle East Memo*, No. 24, June 2012.

¹³Robert Haddick, "The Persian Gulf Needs its Own NATO," 18 May 2012, accessed at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/18/the_persian_gulf_needs_its_own_nato?page=full, 20 February 2013; Thom Shanker and Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. Planning Troop Buildup in Gulf After Exit From Iraq," *The New York Times*, 29 October 2011; Karen Parrish, "Clinton, Panetta to Meet With Gulf Council Ministers," *American Forces Press Service*, 22 September 2011.

¹⁴See, for example, James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "After Iran Gets the Bomb: Containment and its Complications," *Foreign Affairs* 89 (March/April 2010); Robert J. Reardon, *Containing Iran: Strategies for Addressing the Iranian Nuclear Challenge* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2012); Bill Keller, "Nuclear Mullahs," *The New York Times*, 9 September 2012; Suzanne Maloney, interview with John Donovan,

there has been little substantive analysis of what form that containment would take and whether the construction of such a containment regime including the Gulf States is feasible. Two analysts have suggested the formation of a “regional alliance network that would marshal Arab states into a more cohesive grouping,” and one has suggested formalizing the GCC as a true military alliance. Others, however, have asserted that credible new alliance commitments in the Gulf are likely to be very difficult to achieve.¹⁵ But the fact that American political leaders have taken high-level discussions of containment off the table has had the consequence of precluding “thinking very hard about how either Iran or its neighbors would behave” if and when a more robust effort in the Gulf becomes necessary.¹⁶

It is clear that there is an ever-deepening American security interest in the Gulf, and ever-greater interest in whether the United States will be able to stabilize the region. This article seeks to remedy some of the gaps in strategic thinking about the future security architecture of the Gulf by considering the prospects for effective cooperation among the Gulf states to contain Iran. We examine the scenarios in which some form of containment regime against Iran might be employed. We argue that in the continued U.S. standoff with Iran, containment need not denote a “default solution” that is turned to after other attempts to prevent Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear capability have failed.¹⁷ Indeed, containment is already under way, and there are several possible futures in which containment will almost certainly be employed even if no decision to “live with” a nuclear Iran has been made.

The Iranian nuclear standoff raises the larger issue of what future Persian Gulf security may look like. One can envision numerous potential Gulf security arrangements, but for the purposes of our argument, we assume that the United States and the other countries of the Gulf region retain a strong interest in limiting Iran’s influence.¹⁸ Among these options, it is important to analyze one that relies on the existing regional security

“Weighing a Policy of Containment for Iran,” *National Public Radio (NPR): The Talk of the Nation*, 6 March 2012, accessed at <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/06/148053976/weighing-a-policy-of-containment-for-iran>, 23 February 2013.

¹⁵James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, “After Iran Gets the Bomb: Containment and its Complications,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2010); Kenneth M. Pollack, “Security in the Persian Gulf: New Frameworks for the Twenty-First Century,” *Middle East Memo*, No. 24 (June 2012): 3–7; Eric S. Edelman, Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., and Evan Braden Montgomery, “The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran: The Limits of Containment,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2011).

¹⁶Bill Keller, “Rethinking the Unthinkable: ‘Five Myths About Nuclear Weapons,’ and More,” *The New York Times*, 11 January 2013.

¹⁷Edelman, Krepinevich, and Montgomery, “The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran.”

¹⁸Kenneth Pollack has suggested that the Commission for Security Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) could serve as a model for a Gulf power “condominium” that includes Iran. Pollack, “Security in the Persian Gulf.”

organization—the GCC. Our analysis suggests, however, that there is little hope of constructing a multilateral containment regime through existing alliance structures in the Gulf. This is because the political dynamics of the region and impediments to further American investment there will make meaningful integration of the six countries' security postures into a coherent defense structure very difficult.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. We begin with a brief history of the role of containment in U.S. grand strategy, and argue that containment, as currently discussed in the public debates over Iran, differs in important respects from the policy that George Kennan articulated in 1947. We contend that there are several scenarios in which U.S. policy-makers need not make a decision to “live with” a nuclear Iran, but may nonetheless want to consider a regime for containing Iran that includes the Gulf states. We argue that the current popular discourse, which implies a binary choice between preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability on the one hand, and “containing” a nuclear Iran on the other is, in fact, a false dichotomy.

We then demonstrate why it is unlikely that the United States will be able to establish an effective containment regime that relies upon the GCC. To do so, we analyze two historical examples of containment regimes—The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO)—and assess why the former thrived despite early obstacles while the latter was incontrovertibly ineffective. These two cases reveal important insights on the conditions necessary for the establishment of an effective multilateral containment regime in the Gulf. We then turn to an assessment of the Gulf itself, evaluating the prospects for enhanced cooperation among the six GCC states, and find that there are significant obstacles to further integration in the region. In particular, intra-regional rivalries and differences in how each state perceives the threat posed by Iran present serious obstacles to the creation of an integrated defense architecture for the region. This is a sharp departure from the paradigm for an effective containment regime, exemplified by NATO during the Cold War, which drew its cohesive force from the common perception of the threat posed by an external power. Whatever Iran's nuclear trajectory, if the United States intends to continue to stem its influence, containment efforts must acknowledge that there are serious limits on the prospects for intra-Gulf cooperation.

CONCEPTUALIZING CONTAINMENT, PAST AND PRESENT

Containment, as originally conceived by George Kennan, was viewed as a proactive and dynamic tool of statecraft. Kennan became convinced of the

need to limit Soviet influence before the Cold War had begun in earnest, and first articulated his approach in a now-famous telegram to the State Department authored in 1946.¹⁹ In his dispatch, Kennan described a regime that desperately needed an enemy to justify its authoritarian rule. The Soviets, he observed, were ardent nationalists and potentially subversive, but would be inclined to withdraw from attempts at power projection if they met resistance.²⁰ An obvious policy prescription was for the United States to devise ways to push back against the exercise of Soviet power while simultaneously providing the war-weary people of Europe with security. Kennan suggested that this strategy did not make war with the Soviets inevitable; rather, he argued that America could achieve its goals through the calibrated use of political, diplomatic, economic, and psychological tools.²¹

Kennan first used the term “containment” in 1947, and the concept became public in his famous X article that same year. Officially titled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” Kennan argued, “the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” Containment, according to Kennan, could be thought of as the “application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.”²² This vision of containment aimed to prevent Soviet expansion by denying the Soviets influence.²³

Several prominent scholars have argued that containment shaped U.S. grand strategy for the entire Cold War.²⁴ Henry Kissinger famously wrote: “George Kennan came as close to authoring the diplomatic doctrine of his era as any diplomat in our history,”²⁵ while Josef Joffe stated that American grand strategy during the Cold War “consisted of one word: ‘containment.’”²⁶ This characterization, however, was almost certainly too extreme—Kennan did not author a perfect blueprint for American foreign

¹⁹Wilson D. Miscamble, *George Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 22–25.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 26.

²¹George Kennan, “The Background of Current Russian Diplomatic Moves,” 10 December, 1946; George Kennan, “Measures Short of War (Diplomatic),” 16 September 1946, both in Kennan Papers Box 16, as quoted in Miscamble, *Kennan*, 31.

²²“X” [George F. Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947: 566–582.

²³John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63.

²⁴Miscamble, *Kennan*, 349; Gaddis, *Strategies*, 377; Stephen Walt, “The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, 14 (Summer 1989): 5, 49.

²⁵Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co., 1979), 135.

²⁶Josef Joffe, “‘Bismarck’ or ‘Britain’? Toward an American Grand Strategy After Bipolarity,” *International Security*, 19 (Spring 1995): 94.

policy that others endorsed and dutifully implemented. But he did have outsized influence during crucial years of the early Cold War, and American presidents regularly referred back to the doctrine as they formulated their own policies vis-à-vis the Soviets.

Kennan did not directly advocate for formal military alliances as vehicles for containment, but various regional security pacts formed under Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower were intended to ring in the Soviet threat and were inspired by Kennan's emphasis on "strongpoint defense."²⁷ Murmurings that the United States intends to strengthen its relationship with Gulf states evoke, and sometimes directly reference, these early Cold War alliances. Yet containment has taken on a decidedly pejorative connotation in the ongoing debate over how to handle a potentially nuclear Iran.

In contrast to the way it was understood in the early Cold War, today's containment is articulated as an unacceptable fallback option that assumes a conscious decision by the United States to "live with" a nuclear Iran. President Barack Obama has firmly resolved to keep Iran non-nuclear. In his State of the Union Address of 24 January 2012, for example, he averred: "America is determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, and I will take no options off the table to achieve that goal." In March 2012, the President appeared to move one step further, declaring to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee: "Iran's leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon."²⁸ Two days later, Obama repeated his stance at a press conference: "My policy is not containment; my policy is to prevent them from getting a nuclear weapon—because if they get a nuclear weapon that could trigger an arms race in the region, it would undermine our non-proliferation goals, it could potentially fall into the hands of terrorists."²⁹ The President underscored this policy again before the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2012. "Make no mistake," he declared. "A nuclear-armed Iran is not a challenge that can be contained." Obama added: "The United States will do what we must to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon." Both his first- and second-term cabinet

²⁷See, for example, Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and the Sino-American Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 8; Walt, "The Case for Finite Containment," 5.

²⁸"Remarks by the President at 2012 AIPAC Policy Conference," 4 March 2012, accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2012/03/04/president-obama-2012-aipac-policy-conference#transcript>, 23 February 2013.

²⁹White House Press Conference, 6 March 2012, accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/06/press-conference-president>, 22 February 2013.

members have also adopted this position. Congress has also pledged to prevent a nuclear weapons-capable Iran.³⁰

In each of these public repudiations, containment is treated as an option that will signify that the United States has failed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. This new containment is, in essence, a “political dirty word.”³¹ It is the implicit byproduct of failed diplomacy, ineffective sanctions, and military inaction. But Kennan’s containment was not a fallback or binary policy choice representing a least-worst approach to Soviet expansionism. It was, instead, a proactive tool of statecraft aimed at seizing the initiative required to push back against the Soviet threat and to achieve foreign policy goals, rather than a reluctant response to be adopted after an adversary had forced one’s hand. It could also be pursued in parallel with other policy options, and one important element of Kennan’s containment was strengthening and supporting vulnerable allies so pressure on the Soviets would be uniformly applied. Arguments that suggest that Washington will have to choose between the two options of “pursuing a military strike to prevent Iran from going nuclear or implementing a containment strategy to live with a nuclear Iran” ignore these important nuances.³²

Increased U.S. arms sales and closer political relations with Gulf states indicate that containment efforts, defined as actions intended to limit Iran’s regional influence, are already well under way. But in the specific context of containing Iran’s nuclear program, there are several possible contingencies in which the United States might wish explicitly to establish a containment regime to reassure and buttress allies in the Gulf, even if Iran does not cross the nuclear threshold. Each of these five scenarios, which we outline below, requires a realistic assessment of whether the construction of such a regime is feasible, but only one of them requires a decision by the United States to “live with” a nuclear Iran.

Colin Kahl has described two of these potential states of affairs. In early 2012, Kahl observed that the Obama administration was unlikely to choose to accept an Iranian nuclear weapons capability. But what is not often discussed is the likelihood that the most aggressive policy course to prevent the development of an Iranian nuclear weapons capacity—an American or

³⁰“US Senate Reaffirms Commitment to Stopping Iran Develop Nuclear Arms,” 22 September 2012, *Associated Press*, accessed at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/u-s-senate-reaffirms-commitment-to-stopping-iran-developing-nuclear-arms-1.466174>, 24 February 2013.

³¹John Donvan, Host, “Talk of the Nation,” *National Public Radio*, 6 March 2012. Transcript and audio accessed at <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/06/148053976/weighing-a-policy-of-containment-for-iran>, 1 February 2013.

³²Edelman, Krepinevich, and Montgomery, “The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran.”

Israeli airstrike—would also be likely to require some sort of containment regime.³³ Following an attack on Iranian nuclear weapons facilities, the U.S. would have to prepare for the possibility of a violent backlash against the Gulf states and other regional partners, which could last for months or years. There is also a good chance that the Iranians would attempt to reconstitute their program following an attack. Preventing Iran from re-establishing its nuclear program, while calming the nerves of jittery allies that would face conventional retaliation after a U.S. or Israeli strike would require an investment of major proportions in a containment regime. In these scenarios—a containment system designed to handle conventional retaliation after a strike against Iran’s nuclear program, or one designed to cope with reconstitution after such an attack—the United States would need to invest in regional security architecture even after it (or Israel) undertakes military action to forestall an Iranian bomb.

But there are two additional potential scenarios that would require the establishment of a containment structure. If Iran and the P5 + 1 manage to negotiate a diplomatic settlement, it may well be one that allows Iran to keep a civilian nuclear program and some enrichment capacity, albeit with a rigorous inspection regime.³⁴ In this third case, it is hard to believe that Iran’s neighbors would cease to fear its nuclear potential and would be eager to see Iran deterred from diverting its civilian program to nefarious military purposes. The Gulf states would probably still seek a good deal of American assurance.

Finally, a fourth scenario is possible. Even without a negotiated settlement, Iran may stop short of building the bomb, but still leave its neighbors feeling insecure. The position of the U.S. intelligence community remains that the Supreme Leader has not yet taken the decision to weaponize, and former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has said that analysts would observe an Iranian decision to do so.³⁵ Ample evidence suggests that Iran may be pursuing an incremental hedging strategy, whereby it acquires a significant nuclear capability but defers the decision to build the bomb. Iran could therefore unilaterally stop short of a nuclear weapons capability

³³Colin H. Kahl, “The Iran Containment Fallacy,” *The Hill*, 22 February 2012, accessed at <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/212003-the-iran-containment-fallacy>, 10 February 2013; Colin H. Kahl, “Not Time to Attack Iran: Why War Should Be the Last Resort,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2012).

³⁴For a discussion of why a deal with Iran is so difficult and what a settlement might look like, see Robert Jervis, “Getting to Yes with Iran: The Challenges of Coercive Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2013).

³⁵Dan De Luce, “If Iran Builds Bomb, US Has a Year to Act: Panetta,” *Agence France-Presse*, 11 September 2012, accessed at http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gT51_KiC2mWKHv-N7oEkqJOOfyWgQ, 24 February 2013. On this point, see also Kahl, “Not Time to Attack Iran.”

measured by a military device. If the last several years of the standoff are any indication, however, such nuclear limbo will not be comforting to Iran's neighbors, and in this scenario, some sort of containment regime would be a useful reassurance to Gulf States, and could mitigate the destabilizing effects of a breakout-capable Iran.

One can therefore imagine five possible futures in which deterring Iran and assuring regional partners would be crucial. In only one of these, a choice by the administration to live with an Iranian bomb, is containment a fallback position. In the other four, it would be an active policy that would be coupled with ongoing diplomatic efforts to influence Iran's nuclear path, continued sanctions, or even military action. Contrary to the assertions of some experts, containment is not a policy that will necessarily be reserved until Iran "has crossed the point of no return with respect to its nuclear weapons capabilities."³⁶ None of the four scenarios outlined above requires President Obama to go back on his red line and allow Iran to get the bomb. Efforts to deny Iran expanded regional influence are already under way, and it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the United States *does not* continue to pursue some form of containment of the Islamic Republic.

The costs of containing Iran would, however, vary significantly among these four futures. Limiting the regional influence of an Iran that has stopped its program short of the nuclear threshold or accepted a diplomatic deal would, of course, be a less-intensive undertaking than containing and deterring military reprisals following an airstrike. When analysts suggest that the costs and benefits of military action are to be compared to those of containment, however, they ignore the fact that containment in some form will almost certainly appear on the ledger whatever policy option is chosen.

Whether the United States chooses air strikes, opts for continued diplomacy and sanctions, or brokers a deal with Iran, we must seriously evaluate whether and how containment might work in the Gulf. What would be required for a containment regime in the region to function as "strongpoint defense" against an emerging adversary? Can the existing regional security organization, the GCC, serve as a viable structure? Two historical examples of multilateral containment efforts—NATO's success and SEATO's failure—give us a baseline for analyzing this crucial question.

³⁶Suzanne Maloney, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute's Saban Center for Middle East Policy on NPR's *Talk of the Nation* on 6 March 2012, accessed at <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/06/148053976/weighing-a-policy-of-containment-for-iran>, 22 February 2013.

NATO: ENTANGLEMENT BY INVITATION

The NATO alliance serves as the paradigm of successful containment, and the reasons for its endurance highlight some necessary conditions for a multilateral effort aimed at Iran. The U.S. decision to join NATO represented a sharp break with its foreign policy past; from 1800 to 1949, the country had purposely avoided standing peacetime alignments with European powers.³⁷ Until the North Atlantic Treaty, the country had more or less heeded George Washington's warnings against "entangling alliances," and respected the hemispheric divide enshrined in the Monroe Doctrine.³⁸ U.S. senators of an isolationist bent vigorously opposed the NATO treaty, but it mustered sufficient support because its architects believed that the country would not actively be involved in European affairs forever.

America chose to bind itself to NATO to counter the Soviet threat and to recreate a balance of power in Europe.³⁹ The Americans spent NATO's early years navigating these twin commitments, and in the process, increased their financial and military investments in the alliance, as well as their willingness to become enmeshed in internal European affairs. At the time of the alliance's founding, the United States believed that the paramount danger in Europe was not a Soviet invasion but a European loss of heart and political will necessary to rebuild in the postwar years.⁴⁰ The initial American commitment to NATO came in the form of a political security guarantee that relied on the threat of nuclear retaliation for the defense of Europe.⁴¹ The Atlantic Alliance only became an integrated military organization as the Americans responded to external pressures. In particular, three external events—the Soviet development of a nuclear weapon, the North Korean invasion of the South, and, to a lesser extent, the Berlin Blockade—all challenged the notion that the Americans would be able to provide for NATO's security from afar.

The first Soviet nuclear test in September 1949 came as a shock, shattering the American nuclear monopoly, and suggesting that the United States could no longer depend solely on homeland-based bombers to keep the Soviets out of Europe.⁴² An American-based deterrent was seen as less reliable and reassuring if deterrence was mutual and the Soviets could return

³⁷Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO and the United States: The Enduring Alliance* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 8.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Timothy P. Ireland, *Creating the Entangling Alliance: The Origins of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), 4–5.

⁴⁰Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 206–212.

⁴¹Robert E. Osgood, *NATO: The Entangling Alliance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 32.

⁴²Osgood, *The Entangling Alliance*, 52.

an American nuclear blow. Just nine months later, the North Koreans launched an attack on the South, with Joseph Stalin's advance approval, and Truman officials believed that unanswered communist aggression would invite it elsewhere. They also considered the striking parallel between Korea and Germany, two tenuously divided countries.⁴³ NATO allies could not help but fear a similar attack on Germany, and China's entry into the Korean War in September appeared to be evidence of a monolithic communist military threat. The Berlin Blockade also laid bare the weakness of the U.S. military position in Europe. With only two-and-one-third divisions on the ground in 1948, the Americans could not attempt to break the blockade with an armed convoy without taking the decision to mobilize.⁴⁴ By the spring of 1950, the United States and its European allies all realized that a security guarantee supported by a far-off nuclear deterrent was insufficient.

Soon after the first Russian nuclear test, the United States began to consider a major increase in ground forces.⁴⁵ NATO's first strategic concept was approved in December 1949, setting guidelines for how each member would contribute to the broader military mission. The alliance's integrated force structure was devised in 1950.⁴⁶ Early in the Korean War, the United States tripled its defense budget, with only a fraction of the increase going to the war itself. Most of the increase was to provide for an active, forward military defense of Western Europe. American divisions were permanently stationed on European soil beginning in 1951, with an American general commanding NATO troops as the Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR).⁴⁷ In the words of historian Marc Trachtenberg, this was the only strategy "that could hold the western alliance together over the long run."⁴⁸ The United States therefore chose military entanglement lest its security guarantee to Europe seem empty at a perilous time.

The forward defense strategy, however, required not only a robust troop presence, but also the tackling of some thorny intra-alliance issues. The strategy hinged upon the defense of Germany, which required energetic German cooperation. But if Germany was to be defended by the alliance, it was only natural that it should contribute to the effort.⁴⁹ The new

⁴³Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 100.

⁴⁴Osgood, *The Entangling Alliance*, 29.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁶Kaplan, *NATO and the United States*, 43.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁸Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 100.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 101-103.

integrated command structure made it clear that Germany would have to become more of an alliance member, as opposed to an occupied country. Western Europe could not be defended without German troops.⁵⁰ But both the French and the Soviets were deeply concerned about German rearmament. To assuage these fears, the Americans bound themselves to the NATO military structure, so that German participation would only occur under American supervision. The United States made its forward troop commitment and acceptance of the SACEUR position contingent upon allied acceptance of German rearmament, and West Germany was eventually admitted to NATO in 1954.⁵¹

The external threats of the 1949–1950 period made it clear that the defense of Europe would have to be a forward and active one. Concerns about Germany meant that American leadership (and by extension, entanglement) was the only way to accomplish this while holding the alliance together. The American commitment to NATO began as an arms-length guarantee, but the alliance survived its early years because the United States became deeply involved in European affairs, vastly increasing its material commitment. Hastings Lionel Ismay's oft-quoted statement that the alliance's goal was "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down," could not have been accomplished any other way.⁵²

SEATO: GUARANTEED IN NAME ONLY

The failure of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization in some ways foreshadowed the potential difficulties involved in trying to encourage security cooperation among the Gulf states, and was a marked contrast to NATO's success. The Manila Treaty established SEATO in 1954, following the conclusion of several other security guarantees, including U.S. pacts with Japan and South Korea, and the trilateral Australia/New Zealand/United States (ANZUS) agreement. The Eisenhower administration had wholeheartedly embraced "nuclear umbrella" alliances as a tool for managing communist threats. SEATO originated at the Geneva conference of April–July 1954, and its birth was hurried along by the French collapse at Dien Bien Phu.

In light of NATO's early successes, American officials believed that a regional containment organization could be helpful in combating the threat of communist subversion and potential Chinese aggression in Southeast Asia. From its first days, however, it was clear that this would not be a new

⁵⁰Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 107.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 108.

⁵²Ismay, as quoted in David Reynolds, *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1994), 13.

NATO. The member states of SEATO had a variety of reasons for joining the alliance, and their incongruent motivations were only exacerbated by the fact that the military means at SEATO's disposal were ill suited to the end of preventing communist subversion in the region. These factors meant that SEATO lacked the resources and the collective will necessary to evolve into a coherent or capable organization.

The founding Manila Treaty members included the United States, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and Pakistan. All shared an interest in the stability of the region and believed that an American military presence could help to bring this about, but their common vision ended there. The Americans supported SEATO for its deterrent value against communist foes, and hoped that it would facilitate swift military entry into Indochina and elsewhere if it became necessary.⁵³ The British were interested in a less-militaristic and more-flexible pact and preferred to focus on police and intelligence operations that might be useful against subversion. They were interested in clinging to their remaining colonial holdings in the region.⁵⁴ The French also desired to protect their interests in Indochina, and hoped that SEATO would translate into an American commitment to defend the region without requiring much real U.S. presence.⁵⁵

Beyond the pact's great power sponsors, Australia and New Zealand were interested in gaining the support of the United States, Britain, and France. Thailand felt threatened by the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao presence in Laos, and wanted great-power aid. The Philippines hoped for a more solid security guarantee from the Americans but had no immediate interests in Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. Pakistan sought military assistance, and hoped that SEATO would have some marginal impact on its conflict with India over Kashmir, despite the fact that the treaty did not apply there.⁵⁶

The member states' divergent goals were evident in their early commitments to SEATO. At the Manila Conference in September 1954, the Americans announced that they wanted the pact to apply only to cases of "communist aggression." The other members refused to amend the treaty in this direction, because each had hoped, in its own way, to secure broader American involvement in the region. So Secretary of State John Foster

⁵³Leszek Buszynski, *SEATO: The Failure of an Alliance Strategy* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983), 15.

⁵⁴Buszynski, *SEATO*, 22–26.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 26–28.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 33, 42; Henry W. Brands, Jr., "From ANZUS to SEATO: United States Strategic Policy Toward Australia and New Zealand, 1952–1954," *The International History Review* 9 (May 1987): 250–270, at 268.

Dulles attached a note to the treaty explaining that the Americans would interpret their commitments as being specific to communist foes.⁵⁷ In another harbinger of the trouble that was to come, SEATO members also disagreed on the nature of the military capacity that the organization should have. Many of the smaller powers had hoped for a NATO-like integrated command structure with SEATO-dedicated troops. The Americans, however, refused to participate in deep military cooperation, citing a need to maintain “mobile striking power.”⁵⁸ A standing SEATO organization was nonetheless created, but it had no meaningful kinetic power at its disposal. Where communist threats were concerned, the organization could identify them and propose joint action, but counter-subversive operations were the responsibility of member governments.⁵⁹

SEATO's structural shortcomings were first laid bare in the Laotian crisis of 1960–1961. Despite the fact that Thailand felt deeply threatened by incursions into Laos, the Manila Pact members could not decide whether this was grounds for intervention and ruled that the situation was “too complex” to activate the alliance.⁶⁰ Later, the Manila Pact served as part of the initial justification for American intervention in Vietnam, although the British and French did not support it and reduced their roles in the organization. By the time the Vietnam War was over, it was abundantly clear that SEATO did not serve a purpose. The alliance had been unable to act coherently in Laos, and was unwilling to do so in Vietnam. The diverging priorities of the member states and the fact that SEATO had few means to further its supposed mission meant that this containment effort against communist subversion was hamstrung before it began. NATO's ability to overcome early obstacles and SEATO's paralysis and demise impart some useful lessons for the possibility of a multilateral containment regime in the Gulf. As the NATO case instructs, a successful containment effort requires not only great material resources from its sponsors, but a willingness to navigate and engage the internal politics of the region. It also requires a flexibility of commitment and a capacity to increase vastly one's alliance obligations if internal and external threats so require. SEATO, on the other hand, demonstrates starkly that a constellation of states with nominally compatible goals is insufficient for containment success. Members must specify and agree on how their containment strategy will achieve their political ends, and those who are providing the

⁵⁷Brands, “ANZUS to SEATO,” 269.

⁵⁸American Foreign Policy, 1950–1955 (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1957), I, 917.

⁵⁹Buszynski, *SEATO*, 55.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 76.

resources must be committed in more than name alone. Without this cohesion, alliance members cannot advance, and might even undercut, their objectives.

Containment regimes aim first and foremost to limit an adversary's influence and deter aggression. Sending strong deterrent signals means that partners must work assiduously to communicate their commitments to adversaries. An important part of this is a shared understanding of external threats among security partners. A deterrent threat is supported by the capability and intent to follow it through. America's commitment to NATO began with intent, but commensurate capability followed quickly and in spades. American commitments to SEATO lacked in both categories (and France and Britain did little to make up for that fact).

If the United States were to spearhead a containment effort with the states of the GCC, there would be at least two requirements for success. First, the membership would need to evince a coherence and level of commitment that is robust enough to send clear signals. They would need to share an understanding of the Iranian threat, and demonstrate the ability to coordinate effectively to meet it. Second, the United States would have to be prepared to devote significant political and military resources to providing for an integrated Gulf defense effort, and to successfully navigating intra-Gulf politics. We now turn to the question of whether such an effort may be possible among the Gulf states, and between them and the United States.

CONCEPTUALIZING CONTAINMENT: THE GULF STATES AND IRAN

The Origins of the Obstacles

The Gulf Cooperation Council was established in 1981 to provide a platform for the leadership of the six member countries to cooperate on issues of mutual interest.⁶¹ The organization formed as a response to the Iranian Revolution and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war. But despite the establishment of a Peninsula Shield Force in the 1980s to provide the group with a limited military capability, the GCC has never developed into a formal mutual defense alliance.

This section evaluates the prospects for enhanced security cooperation among the six member states of the Council in order to contain Iran. As the cases of NATO and SEATO suggest, the prospects for an effective containment regime in the Gulf will depend on whether the states in the region can

⁶¹Partrick, *Gulf State Integration*, 2.

achieve sufficient unity of purpose and integration on security issues to deter Iran. It will also depend on whether the United States can devote the necessary political and military resources to the GCC to help it become an effective organization.

Since the United Kingdom withdrew from the region in 1971 and the Gulf became an independent security system, however, there have been persistent challenges to integration on defense issues, driven largely by two phenomena. First, contests for power and influence among the Arab Gulf states have stood in the way of the development of the degree of trust and coherence necessary to build a truly effective containment regime. This dynamic manifests itself in a number of ways, but was perhaps illustrated most clearly when the sheikhdoms of the lower Gulf—what is today Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—achieved independence from the United Kingdom and such internal rivalries frustrated an early attempt at unity.

Second, the states in the region “view threats primarily through the lens of regime security” rather than more conventional balance-of-power considerations.⁶² Indeed, even the “external” threat posed by Iran is in important senses internal—many Gulf states see Iran primarily as a political challenge to their domestic authority because of the Islamic Republic’s perceived ability to undermine the authority of the (Sunni) ruling families.⁶³ Because each state perceives the danger posed by Iran differently, however, they are not all willing to take the same combination of measures against it that would be required to create a robust, unified containment architecture. This poses a stark contrast to NATO, where member states agreed on relatively specific goals with respect to an external threat that was similar in kind for the member states.⁶⁴

We begin this section by examining an early attempt at regional unity among the nine sheikhdoms that became Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE. This abortive effort took place between 1968, when the United Kingdom announced its intention to withdraw from the region, and 1971, when the British actually withdrew, and illustrates some of the enduring features of regional security relationships. The attempt to establish the Federation of the Arab Emirates (FAA) in 1971 was perhaps the most important effort to pool sovereignty among the sheikhdoms in order to achieve security

⁶²F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

⁶³See, for example, Abdul-Reda Assiri, *Kuwait’s Foreign Policy: City-State in World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 89.

⁶⁴See, for example, F. Gregory Gause, III, “Threats and Threat Perception in the Persian Gulf Region,” *Middle East Policy*, XIV (Summer 2007): 120.

objectives in the modern history of the region.⁶⁵ Analyzing the reasons for its failure, in turn, discloses persistent features of the Gulf's security dynamics that remain to this day, and which have frustrated more modern attempts to integrate control over security-related issues.

After analyzing the failed attempt to create the FAA in 1971, we then examine two more recent attempts at integration to achieve security objectives in the Gulf and find that they failed for reasons similar to those that doomed the FAA. We then turn to an examination of the prospects for U.S. cooperation with and commitment to a more-robust constellation among the GCC states. We argue that intra-Gulf rivalries and differing perceptions of the (largely internal) threat posed by Iran, as well as fiscal and political barriers to a deeper U.S. commitment, place significant limits on the prospects for a robust, multilateral effort to contain Iran.

Achieving Independence: A Stillborn Attempt at Unity

Between 1820 and 1916, the United Kingdom established treaty relationships with the sheikhdoms of the lower Gulf to ensure regional stability and protect commerce with India.⁶⁶ But in the post-World War II era, the demands on the United Kingdom had changed, and by 1961, amidst a growing tide of Arab nationalist sentiment, Kuwait achieved independence.⁶⁷ By the late 1960s, under pressure from serious economic and political constraints at home,⁶⁸ the United Kingdom announced its intention to withdraw its forces from the Far East and all of the states of the Persian Gulf before the end of 1971.⁶⁹

Despite the British withdrawal, however, the region remained strategically important to the United Kingdom and to the United States, and so both sought ways to secure their interests in the face of a new post-imperial security landscape. At the time of the British withdrawal, the United States defined its specific interests in the region as the free flow of oil (the Gulf provided 85 percent of the oil used by U.S. forces in Southeast Asia), the continued use of communications and intelligence facilities in Iran, and the perpetuation of landing rights in Saudi Arabia.⁷⁰

⁶⁵See, Partrick, *Gulf State Integration*, 3.

⁶⁶W. Taylor Fain, *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 14–15.

⁶⁷Fain, *American Ascendance*, 19.

⁶⁸Sohei Sato, "Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf, 1964–1968: A Pattern and a Puzzle," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37 (March 2009): 99, 112.

⁶⁹Jacob Abadi, *Britain's Withdrawal from the Middle East, 1947–1971: The Economic and Strategic Imperatives* (Princeton, NJ: The Kingston Press, 1982), 212–214.

⁷⁰Paper prepared by the National Security Council staff: Persian Gulf, 4 June 1970, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 257.

The United States saw instability among the Gulf states as the primary threat to those interests, as it could be exploited by Arab radicals or by the Soviet Union.⁷¹ Such chaos, the United States and Britain feared, would arise from the vacuum left after the British withdrawal, when political subversion would make the states of the region vulnerable;⁷² a threat that the United States regarded as more plausible than external aggression.⁷³ At the same time, officials like National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger were acutely aware of the limited direct influence of the United States in the region, and of the fact that the United States, bogged down in Vietnam, was unable at that time to physically replace the British as the regional security guarantor.⁷⁴

Because of their limited ability to directly protect their interests after the British withdrawal, the United Kingdom, supported by the United States, endorsed the creation of a single political entity, the FAA, in order to stabilize the nine sheikhdoms of the lower Gulf that were to achieve independence (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Bahrain, Dubai, Fujairah, Qatar, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain). The FAA was a part of Britain and America's attempt to forestall the activation of longstanding latent disputes that they feared would surface after the British withdrawal, including border rows between Iran and Iraq, Iran and Bahrain, Iraq and Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi.⁷⁵

In this potentially volatile context, U.S. officials believed that a federation among the nine emirates of the lower Gulf "represent[ed] the best hope for stability among the Arab Shaykhdoms."⁷⁶ After substantial effort, however, the attempt to establish the FAA out of the nine emirates failed, and in 1971, Bahrain and Qatar achieved independence, while the remaining seven emirates eventually joined together as the UAE.⁷⁷ Examining the reasons for this failed attempt at integration sheds light on persistent features of the security system of the Gulf, with important implications

⁷¹Paper prepared by the National Security Council staff: Persian Gulf, 256.

⁷²Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 22 October 1970, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 280; telegram from the embassy in Iran to the Department of State, 4 February 1970, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 246.

⁷³Memorandum of Conversation, 13 January 1971, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 289.

⁷⁴Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 22 October 1970, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 280.

⁷⁵Charles Kupchan, *The Persian Gulf and the West: The Dilemmas of Security* (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 34; Richard Young, "Equitable Solutions for Offshore Boundaries: The 1968 Saudi Arabia–Iran Agreement," *The American Journal of International Law* 64 (January 1970): 152–157.

⁷⁶Memorandum from Peter Rodman of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 31 December 1969, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 245.

⁷⁷Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates: A Political and Social History of the Trucial States* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 195.

for the future ability of the Gulf states to achieve the degree of integration needed for an effective regime to contain Iran today.

First, contests for leadership and power among the states of the region, driven in large part by differences in development and oil wealth, were an important factor dooming integration efforts in the period leading up to independence. Indeed, a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate published a few months before Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE became independent noted that despite the best efforts of the United Kingdom, “[t]here is little prospect that British-sponsored efforts to organize a federation of these tiny sheikhdoms will come to fruition.”⁷⁸ This failure was due predominantly to the “mind-boggling jealousies and tribal prerogatives that affect regional cooperation among the Gulf states.”⁷⁹ General disputes among the proposed members of the FAA manifested themselves as disagreements about which powers should be delegated to the proposed federation, and where the capital of the FAA should lie.⁸⁰ Bahrain was also unable to arrive at a satisfactory power-sharing arrangement with the less-developed emirates in the proposed Federation.⁸¹

Such contests for power and influence do not mean, however, that the Gulf states were unable to act in concert when it suited their interests to do so. Indeed, in February 1971, while negotiations about the FAA were ongoing, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi worked with Iraq, Iran, and Kuwait to re-negotiate the terms of their agreements with international oil companies.⁸²

The sheikhdoms of the region, however, had differing perceptions of the threat posed by Iran to the security of the ruling regimes. These distinct views on Iran dictated different approaches by each state to the Islamic Republic and stood in the way of deeper integration among the Gulf states, both at independence and today. Around the time of independence, as today, some of the sheikhdoms of the lower Gulf considered Iran to be their chief rival. Shortly after the United Kingdom announced its intentions to leave the region in 1968, for example, Iran re-asserted its perennial claims to sovereignty over Bahrain, which it has intermittently declared since the

⁷⁸National Intelligence Estimate, 1 April 1971, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 306.

⁷⁹Memorandum from Harold Saunders and Rosemary Neaher of the National Security Council staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 19 May 1971, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 314.

⁸⁰Memorandum from Harold Saunders and Rosemary Neaher of the National Security Council staff, 313.

⁸¹Memorandum of Conversation, 13 January 1971, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 294; Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates*, 195.

⁸²Intelligence Memorandum prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, March 1971, *FRUS* 1969–1976, Vol. XXIV, 298.

late eighteenth century.⁸³ Ultimately Iran's claims were resolved by a 1970 UN-sponsored "survey," which determined that the population of the island preferred independence to Iranian control, but difficulties in Iran's relationship with the island persist to this day. Tensions also flared between Iran and the UAE when the former seized three islands in a dispute that remains unresolved.

Some of the lower Gulf sheikhdoms, in contrast, considered Iran to be an ally with whom their interests converged in the period surrounding their independence. In 1973, for example, the Shah of Iran sent troops to Oman to assist the Sultan in putting down a leftist rebellion,⁸⁴ and in doing so, helped cement the position of the Omani ruler. Oman today continues to enjoy cordial relations with the Islamic Republic, and in 2011, mediated the release of two American hikers taken captive in Iran. Tense relations between the states of the GCC and other regional actors are not limited to Iran. Each, for example, has a differing perception of the threat posed by Iraq, with Saudi Arabia, and others, failing to open Embassies in Baghdad because of mistrust of the government of Nouri al-Maliki.⁸⁵ Kuwait, by contrast, has a functional embassy there.

These sorts of differences constitute an important obstacle to closer regional integration because they condition each state's threat perceptions, and thus the degree to which they will be willing to cede or pool sovereignty in order to protect themselves. It also determines, in large part, the degree to which various GCC states will commit themselves to a containment structure designed to deter Iran. As demonstrated by the history of NATO and SEATO, a shared understanding and approach to an outside threat is important for the formation of an effective, well-integrated containment regime.

Persistent Challenges to Integration

Far from being mere historical artifacts, the tendencies identified above—contests for regional power and influence and differing threat perceptions, particularly with respect to Iran—continue to pose obstacles to closer security integration in the region. Indeed, two specific initiatives launched in recent years to more closely integrate the states of the GCC have failed for reasons similar to those that prevented the countries of the region from achieving unity in the years immediately after independence.

⁸³Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates* (London: Ithaca Press, 1998), 61–62.

⁸⁴Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 352–353.

⁸⁵Jack Healy, "Saudis Pick First Envoy to Baghdad in 20 Years," *The New York Times*, 21 February 2012.

The first initiative was aimed at creating an integrated missile defense radar system to provide early warning and to deter against an Iranian missile attack.⁸⁶ The United States has sold billions of dollars of missiles and related radar equipment to GCC countries on a bilateral basis in recent years, but it has struggled to achieve a truly integrated, region-wide missile defense capability. Indeed, as General James Mattis, then-Commander of U.S. Central Command noted, effective air and missile defense requires comprehensive collaborative planning and direction between the United States and regional partners; effective and interoperable command, control, and communications capabilities; planned integrated air and missile defense responses to enemy action; and common rules of engagement and missile defense firing doctrine.⁸⁷ In short, it requires a truly integrated defense architecture among the states of the GCC.

But while closer integration has long been a goal, these efforts have not been successful. This is due in large part to the fact that political challenges stemming from historic rivalries have inhibited the kind of close cooperation among GCC states that would be necessary for such a missile defense system to function effectively.⁸⁸ Specifically, disagreements about the conditions for sharing data among the elements of the system located in different countries and the location of a command center have prevented the creation of a missile defense system as well-designed and closely integrated as analogous systems in Europe.⁸⁹ Indeed, the states of the region have failed to agree on the location of a missile defense command center, largely because of the presumptive control over the system that such a command center would provide. Such disputes also doomed the GCC's efforts to create a common currency; the location of a regional central bank similarly became a bone of contention, shelving any possibility of an agreement.⁹⁰

⁸⁶Patrick M. Cronin, "Can U.S. help Gulf shield itself against Iran?" *CNN*, 14 August 2012, accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/14/opinion/cronin-missile-shield/>, 22 February 2013.

⁸⁷General James Mattis, Remarks before International Symposium on Air Defense in Saudi Arabia, *Press Release, United States Central Command*, 17 April 2011, accessed at <http://www.centcom.mil/press-releases/u-s-central-command-commander-addresses-international-symposium-on-air-defense-in-saudi-arabia>, 22 February 2013.

⁸⁸Thom Shanker, "U.S. and Gulf Allies Pursue a Missile Shield Against Iranian Attack," *The New York Times*, 8 August 2012.

⁸⁹Andrew Quinn, "U.S., Gulf Countries Seek to Advance Missile Defense Plan," 28 September 2012, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/28/us-un-assembly-gulf-usa-idUSBRE88R1GW20120928>, 23 February 2013.

⁹⁰Mahmoud Habboush, "Analysis: Gulf States Struggle to Agree on Missile Shield," 30 April 2012, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/30/us-gulf-missile-defence-idUSBRE83TOQB20120430>, 20 February 2013.

The second initiative consists of a December 2011 proposal by Saudi King Abdullah to more closely unify the states of the GCC into a “single entity.”⁹¹ The primary motivation for the proposal was the uprisings of the Arab Spring in general, and in particular, the revolt in Bahrain, in which a Shiite majority and other liberal protesters challenged the rule of the Sunni al-Khalifa family. But despite the fact that the fear of contagion from the Arab Spring posed a direct threat to the domestic stability of all of the ruling families of the region, that fear was insufficient to draw the six states of the region more closely together; a year and a half after King Abdullah’s proposal, it appears to have encountered serious obstacles.⁹² This is largely due to fear on the part of states like the UAE and Qatar that any such union would inevitably be dominated by Saudi Arabia—precisely the kind of intra-regional rivalries for leadership that prevented the unity of the lower Gulf states upon independence. The forces that prevented Gulf unity in 1971 appear to be alive and well today.

Prospects for Patronage: The United States and the GCC

Beyond the internal obstacles to greater integration among the Gulf states, there are also significant obstacles to the United States serving as the guarantor for any enhanced regional security structure in the Gulf akin to the role it played in NATO. In the past, such investments have required significant military footprints, including forward troop deployments, a robust schedule of joint training and exercises, some degree of inter-operable equipment, and even integrated war planning. More importantly, any such defense pact would require a web of established relationships between military and civilian bureaucracies, and indeed the creation of shared institutions devoted to military planning, political coordination, and intelligence sharing, and the development of joint military doctrine for use in case of hostilities.

While this exists today to some degree, there are at least two broad sets of reasons why the United States is unlikely to invest in the creation of even more-robust independent institutional structures in the Gulf in the years to come. The first, and most important, has to do with continued budgetary pressure, including on military spending, in the United States. In an environment of fiscal austerity, and with the United States coming out

⁹¹Angus McDowall and Asma Alsharif, “Gulf Arabs Back Unity After Hinting at Iran Threat,” *Reuters*, 20 December 2011, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/20/us-saudi-gulf-idUSTRE7BJ1MF20111220>, 21 February 2013.

⁹²Andrew Hammond, “Analysis: Saudi Gulf Union Plan Stumbles As Wary Leaders Seek Detail,” *Reuters*, 17 May 2012, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/17/us-gulf-union-idUSBRE84G0WN20120517>, 24 February 2013.

of more than a decade of combat in the Middle East and South Asia, there will probably be little appetite for a major investment in the creation of a comprehensive new defense architecture in the region. And while the United States is perfectly willing to sell tens of billions of dollars worth of advanced military equipment, investing in the creation of collaborative institutions and doctrines is another matter entirely. Indeed, even a proposed sale of \$60 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia in 2010 prompted 198 Members of Congress to write to the Secretaries of State and Defense to question the rationale for the sale.⁹³ If that was the reaction when the United States proposed to sell billions of dollars worth of arms to its allies, it can be expected that a long-term commitment to investing in new or enhanced institutions needed for a robust security architecture would probably provoke fatal opposition. Fiscal constraints have already placed important limitations on U.S. forward deployment to the Gulf.⁹⁴ Moreover, the Obama administration's strategy of "pivoting" toward East Asia does not augur well for a more robust Gulf commitment.

A second obstacle to greater American involvement lies in the political difficulties for the states in the region that would be caused by a deeper and more-overt U.S. military presence in the region. The presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Persian Gulf War became a rallying cry for al Qaeda,⁹⁵ and in 2003, after more than a decade with a significant military presence in the Kingdom, the United States withdrew the vast majority of its forces from Saudi soil.⁹⁶ While the United States retains extensive bases throughout the Gulf, in many cases, it keeps a low public profile to avoid provoking domestic opposition to its presence. In this context, it would probably prove difficult for the United States to expand its presence sufficiently to create a robust defense architecture.

Taken together, the current fiscal climate and general wariness toward the U.S. military presence in the region suggest that a more-resource-intensive commitment to an integrated defense architecture in the Gulf, whether through the existing structure of the GCC or through some other means, is unlikely to be forthcoming. The persistent obstacles to integration

⁹³Josh Rogin, "Congressional Letter Questioning Saudi Arms Sales Gets 198 Signatures," *Foreign Policy*, 12 November 2010, accessed at http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/12/congressional_letter_questioning_saudi_arms_sales_gets_198_signatures, 24 February 2013.

⁹⁴Eyder Peralta, "Citing Uncertainty, Pentagon Will Not Deploy Aircraft Carrier to Persian Gulf," 6 February 2013, accessed at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/02/06/171300433/citing-uncertainty-pentagon-will-not-deploy-aircraft-carrier-to-persian-gulf>, 24 February 2013.

⁹⁵Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113.

⁹⁶Eric Schmitt, "U.S. to Withdraw All Combat Forces from Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, 29 April 2003.

among the Gulf states themselves and the impediments to greater U.S. involvement there suggest that encouraging defense integration among Gulf Arab states to contain Iran, as some analysts have suggested, is unlikely to be a viable path forward.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARD A “STRONGPOINT DEFENSE”

As we have demonstrated, there are four plausible scenarios in which a robust containment regime may be necessary even if the United States does not decide to “live with” a nuclear Iran. In each of these, strengthening and reassuring jittery regional partners would be a top priority if the United States hopes to ensure a modicum of stability in the Gulf. But as the history of NATO and SEATO demonstrates, multilateral containment regimes are not reserve options, selected after all other choices have been exhausted. Rather, they are laboriously constructed political entities that also often entail the creation of integrated institutions and strategic doctrines. They require unity of purpose and a degree of integration among the member states of the containment regime, and also the close support of an outside power like the United States.

As we have shown, however, the states that comprise the GCC have faced significant obstacles to the kind of integration that would be necessary for a robust multilateral alliance. The United States is also highly unlikely to be able to devote the resources or political capital needed to help shape the states of the region into a unified defense structure. This does not, however, suggest that there is no hope for the United States to limit Iran’s influence through the support of allies and regional security—it simply suggests that this goal should not be pursued collectively or formally.

Because the states of the GCC vary in their perceptions of the Iranian threat, as well as in their ability to work with one another, the United States should instead expect to shoulder the primary burden of containing Iran, working with the states of the region whenever and in whichever ways possible. Like Otto von Bismarck’s alliance strategy in the late nineteenth century, or the U.S. approach in northeast Asia, a “hub-and-spokes” configuration of defense ties would allow the United States to provide the region with the political and military assistance it needs to contain Iran, without requiring that it engage deeply with intra-Gulf politics. Unlike the German Chancellor’s or the mid-century American alliance strategies, however, this engagement strategy does not require a series of formal military alliances.

The failure of SEATO is a poignant reminder of how an alliance strategy may founder if the states in a threatened region do not share the same defense priorities and goals as their superpower patron. The varied nature of the relations between the United States and some GCC states, and the

Gulf states' uneven perception of the Iranian threat, suggest that security paradigms are not close enough to sustain a formal, specific guarantee over the long term. Flexible, informal relations are preferable. Indeed, when the NATO alliance was proposed in 1948, Kennan himself was skeptical of its permanence and its inherently militarized approach. Containment, in his eyes, relied on political, psychological, and economic tools as much as on kinetic ones, and required a dynamism that could be undermined by a complex, rigid, standing defense organization.⁹⁷

While the region may never come together into a single integrated containment structure, the United States can still leverage the comparative advantage possessed by each state in the region to create a security system in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The United States will ultimately have to undertake the primary role of operationalizing much of the containment systems on its own, working individually with its GCC partners as appropriate. But each state will contribute what it is capable of adding to the U.S.-led regime without the United States having to invest in the institutions required by new collective security regimes for the Gulf. Some, like the UAE, may provide bases for the United States to forward-deploy advanced fighter jets;⁹⁸ others, like Saudi Arabia, may continue cooperation in intelligence and counterterrorism,⁹⁹ contending against Iran's asymmetric avenues of influence. In all cases, the United States should assist each state in building the capabilities that both it and the region need to diffuse Iran's influence, without indulging in the desire to invest in additional institutions.

There are signs that the United States has embarked upon a path of pursuing stronger, informal bilateral ties with the Gulf states, selling billions of dollars of offensive and defensive weaponry to the states of the Gulf in the last several years. It should continue this course, conscious that efforts to integrate these weapons sales into a more-robust and coherent regional security architecture are unlikely to prevail. A more-difficult challenge may arise, however, if the long-simmering standoff over Iran's nuclear program boils over and a strike occurs, or Iran appears to move toward an actual weapons capability. As with the first Soviet nuclear test in 1949, the Korean invasion in 1950, or the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, a full-blown crisis in the Gulf may superficially appear to be a catalyst

⁹⁷See Miscamble, *Kennan*, 129; 133–134; 139–140.

⁹⁸Anshel Pfeffer, "U.S. Upgrades Strike Capabilities Against Iran, Stations 'Stealth' Fighters in Gulf," *Haaretz*, 27 January 2013, accessed at <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/iphone-blog-article/u-s-upgrades-strike-capabilities-against-iran-stations-stealth-fighters-in-gulf.premium-1.496668>, 21 February 2013.

⁹⁹Greg Miller and Karen De Young, "Brennan Nomination Exposes Criticism on Targeted Killings and Secret Saudi Base," *The Washington Post*, 5 February 2013.

for enhanced regional cohesion and U.S. commitment. For an integrated containment structure to prevail, however, it is not allies' short-term incentives in a crisis that matter, but rather long-term security priorities that must cohere.

If, indeed, Iran is a threat that can be contained, "strongpoint defense" in the Gulf will look nothing like NATO or SEATO. It must depart from the security paradigms of the past, accepting, rather than obscuring the profound obstacles to Gulf security integration that have defined the region since its independence, and maintaining the flexibility to respond to whatever regional conflicts arise. The answers to the Gulf's containment conundrum will not simply materialize when the current crisis peaks. As Kennan might advise, U.S. policymakers must seize the initiative and plan for a modern, dynamic, security system in the Gulf that acknowledges twenty-first century resource constraints and political realities. Regional stability, whether in the aftermath of an airstrike or in the wake of a settlement, demands it.*

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