כנס הרצליה
השנתי העשירי
על מאזן החוסן והביטחון הלאומי

HERZLIYA 2010 הרצליה
January 31 - February 3, 2010 The Tenth Annual
Herzliya Conference

The "Poly-Nuclear" Middle East and the Cold War Paradigm

Herzliya Report

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The "Poly-Nuclear" Middle East and the Cold War Paradigm

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Hidden among platitudes on the peace-loving nature of all three monotheistic religions (particularly Islam), President Obama referred in his Cairo Speech, almost en passant, to what is probably the most critical strategic issue on the international agenda. Declaring his understanding of "those who protest that some countries have weapons that others do not" he took the position that "no single nation should pick and choose which nations hold nuclear weapons". At the same time, he qualified this "declaration of nuclear right" with the warning that a nuclear Iran would lead to "a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path". To Middle Eastern ears, the message was that American concerns do not derive from the threat that a nuclear Islamic Republic of Iran per se might pose, but to the consequent nuclearization of Iran's Arab neighbors that may ensue.

The prospect of nuclear (Iran-Israel) or a "poly-nuclear" Middle East has been debated for some time in academic and policy circles and has given rise to a number of theories regarding the relevance of the lessons of the Cold War to such a situation. Some invoke the experience of the Cold War to argue that a "poly-nuclear" Middle East can still be averted. Others argue that a nuclear Middle East may even provide a more stable regional order based on the Cold War doctrine of "mutually assured destruction" or MAD.

Indeed, today we know that the Cold War was much less stable than it appeared to be and that cultural differences played a critical role in the behavior of the parties to that conflict. This may prove to be even more so in the context of the Middle East. There are substantial cultural, religious, political and organizational differences between the protagonists in the Cold War and candidates for nuclear powers in the Middle East, which should raise questions regarding the probability of a Cold War type strategic balance in the region and of the consequent risk of nuclear confrontation. These differences can be summarized in four key areas: (1) the dynamics of regional proliferation that seem to make a nuclear arms race inevitable and increase the likelihood of transfer of nuclear weapons to non-state (terrorist) entities; (2) the distinction between the Cold War paradigm of bi-polar deterrence based on second strike and the multi- polar situation in which no nation would have such a capability which will be the case in the Middle East (3) the role of religion or the level of rationality in political decision making; (4) strong executive hierarchal command and control structures as opposed to diffuse multi-polar "polycratic " regimes.

The Dynamics of Proliferation in the Middle East

The first issue to address is whether a poly-nuclear Middle East can be averted. During the Cold War era countries such as Germany and Japan agreed to forego a military nuclear capability though they had sufficient technology to cross the threshold. In the case of Germany and Japan, this was achieved through extended assurances, guaranteeing American allies protection against attack by any other nuclear states as a substitute (which made political, economic and strategic sense) for maintaining

their own nuclear arsenal. The Indian-Pakistani case also seems to offer a model of a nuclearization of a sub-region which did not extend outside of the region. One could argue for the application of these models to the Middle East either by reaching a similar arrangement with the Islamic Republic on its capping its nuclear program at a German/Japanese "threshold" status, or by offering broad (US) assurances to other Middle Eastern states in lieu of their acquiring their own nuclear weapons. The "German/Japanese model" seems to be gaining popularity more and more as it becomes clear that negotiations will not bring about a cessation of Iran's enrichment activities.

However, both the East Asian and European precedents do not seem to be applicable to the Middle East. The success of this strategy in East Asia owed itself to a great extent to the fact that China preferred the US presence and US assurances to its neighbors to a nuclear Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Vis-à-vis Germany, it must be seen in the general context of NATO strategy in Europe. In the Indian sub-continent, there exist no other major countries for which a nuclear program might have been in the cards.

Furthermore, the Islamic regime's current drive for nuclear weapons was originally motivated by Iraq's WMD capabilities and programs during the Saddam Hussein era, but continued as a strategic response to the perceived threat from the US[1] and Israel and as an umbrella under which it can expand its influence in the region. Nuclear weapons are also seen by Iran as compensation for Iran's humiliation at the hands of the West during the last centuries and as a "membership card" to an exclusive and respected club of nuclear powers. These goals will not be served by Iran achieving a threshold status. Domestic pressures also would make it difficult to forego the nuclear program; the efforts and monies spent on the nuclear project, the prestige of key figures and apparati in the regime and the affront to national pride if Iran were to be coerced into giving up the program will play a role.

It also seems as unlikely that US assurances will suffice to reassure the (Sunni) Arab countries of the Middle East- particularly after the West failed in preventing (Shiite) Iran from achieving a nuclear capability. Iran has consistently called for leaving the security of the Gulf in the hands of the Gulf countries themselves (a euphemism for Iranian hegemony without American or British presence). On the other hand, the very failure of the US to prevent Iran from going nuclear and the regional image of the Obama administration as conciliatory towards Iran will diminish any faith that the countries of the region may have in American guarantees. It is also doubtful that domestic opinion in those countries would support reliance on the "infidel" US to defend them against Iran or that domestic opinion in the United States would support the economic and military investment in theatre defense for the oil Sheikhs of the Gulf. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Saudi Arabia would acquire a nuclear weapon from Pakistan (whose nuclear program it funded) and it is hard to believe that countries like Egypt, Syria and even Iraq could allow themselves to be far behind. It would also be reasonable to assume that until these countries acquire a nuclear capability, they will rely more and more on chemical and biological weapons (the "poor man's bomb"), thus eroding the international taboo on those weapons as well.

Middle Eastern nuclear proliferation as described above may not remain restricted to states. Weapons of mass destruction may filter down to non-state entities in such a scenario in two ways: to any of a

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[1] The fact that the United States attacked Iraq despite its having chemical and biological weapons only strengthens the Iranian resolve to achieve a nuclear capability, which presumably is the only non-conventional capability which can effectively deter the United States.

plethora of quasi-states with differing levels of control (Kurdistan, Palestine), terrorist organizations (al-Qaeda, Hamas, Islamic Jihad) and rival ethnic groups for whom the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a hostile state would be an incentive to acquire at least a limited WMD capability; and to "proxy" or "surrogate" terrorist groups (Hizballah). The Cold War experience that nuclear powers did not transfer to their allies or proxies nuclear weapons or technology to make them would not apply. The break in the dam gates of proliferation would make it easier for those entities to acquire the weapons, and the states may have an interest in providing them to keep control over their own proxies.

One Strike and You're Out

If indeed the Middle East becomes "poly-nuclear", the next question is whether the Cold War paradigm of MAD may apply to this region. Some prestigious Cold War experts (including Kenneth Waltz[2] and Thomas Schelling[3]), accept the premise that a nuclear Iran will most probably lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, but draw on Cold War experience to argue that such an eventuality may not be as catastrophic as it seems. A nuclear Middle East, they argue, may even provide a more stable regional order based on the Cold War doctrine of "mutually assured destruction" or MAD. According to their line of thought, the very possession of nuclear weapons tempers military adventurism and inculcates a degree of strategic responsibility commensurate with the grave consequences that would result from nuclear conflict. These experts point at the fears that permeated the western military establishments of a nuclear China and the fact that a nuclear Indian sub- continent did not result in nuclear war, despite mutual hostility and frequent outbreaks of crisis.

This does not seem likely for two key reasons: the bi-polar paradigm of the Cold War differed fundamentally from the complexities of multi-polar deterrence that will emerge in the Middle East; and the existence of a credible "second strike" capability on both sides which characterized the Cold War from an early stage, and will be absent from the Middle East for the foreseeable future.

The Cold War was in essence a bilateral struggle between American and Soviet blocs, which simplified the signaling of intentions and prevention of misunderstandings. Scott Sagan[4] has pointed out that the assumption that nuclear weapons are a stabilizing factor is a misreading of the history of the Cold War. The early stages of the Cold War were far less stable than our selective memories would like to believe. Stability that was achieved crisis after crisis convinced the two sides to install measures to prevent inadvertent catastrophe. Thus, the Cold War paradigm was based on a broad spectrum of means of communication: diplomatic relations and hotlines on the strategic level and means to convey urgent messages on tactical levels, confidence of both sides in their ability to maintain escalation dominance in case of tension. In any case, the "bi-polar" nature of the conflict meant that each side knew that any actions of the other should be taken in the context of their relations.

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[2] Kenneth Waltz has taken this position for over two decades. See his assertion that "Adversary stales that acquire them are thereby made more cautious in their dealings with each other... The likelihood of war decreases as deterrent and defensive capabilities increase. Nuclear weapons, responsibly used, make wars hard to start. Nations that have nuclear weapons have strong incentives to use them responsibly. These statements hold for small as for big nuclear powers. Because they do, the measured spread of nuclear weapons is more to be welcomed than feared." Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Better," Adelphi Papers, Number 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981)

[3] See interview with Thomas Schelling: Michael Spence, "Mr. Counterintuition: America is safer with sophisticated enemies". Wall Street Journal, Saturday, February 17,2007

[4] See Scott Sagan's arguments in Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed, 2003.

A "poly-nuclear" Middle East will be fundamentally different and less stable in this aspect. Relations between the countries of the region are notoriously unstable. Between Israel and the two key candidates for nuclearization - Iran and Saudi Arabia - diplomatic relations do not exist at all. This will make hotlines and sending of calming signals much more difficult. In these circumstances, no party will be have escalation dominance and the potential for spiraling of tensions leading to nuclear confrontation is greater than ever in the Cold War. Nuclear alerts by one party will not be interpreted only by the party it was intended for but by all other parties, which may react accordingly, contributing to spiraling multi-lateral escalation.

The essence of MAD was the existence of a credible "second strike" capability. This was based on large stockpiles in both Superpowers and the deployment of delivery capabilities that would survive a first strike (either due to their protection or their off-shore deployment) and assure mutual destruction. Indeed, the first years of the Cold War, before the two Superpowers developed the capabilities for mutual destruction and the command and control mechanism to prevent such a catastrophe, were the most dangerous and held the highest risk of both nuclear war and local conflicts under the "umbrella" of nuclear deterrence.

For the foreseeable future there will be no balance of MAD in the Middle East. Even assuming the maximum rate of acquisition of weapons grade fissile material for building nuclear weapons, the new nuclear nations will not reach a level of MAD for some decades. For some time to come, the new nuclear powers will also not have a credible second strike capability based on a large enough stockpile of nuclear weapons and the ability to deploy them and their delivery systems in places (e.g. submarines or well protected silos) and in amounts large enough to mete out a fatal blow to the enemy, even after the country is attacked. Even if a regional nuclear power were able to retaliate effectively against one adversary, there would remain the possibility of retaliation by one of the allies of the attacked country. This will increase the inclination of a country which sees itself threatened to deliver the first strike.

During the entire period of the Cold War, none of the nuclear powers provided their client states or proxy organizations with weapons of mass destruction. True, theories were raised in the early days of China having become a nuclear power, that it may use its nuclear weapons in "catalytic action" against the US or the USSR in order to provoke a nuclear war between those countries.[5] In the absence of a credible second strike capability in the first stages of a nuclear Middle East, delay of the enemy second strike will be paramount. Since the origin of a nuclear attack with air-delivery systems (aircraft or missiles) would be easily identifiable, a country may attempt to obfuscate its direct responsibility for an attack by launching a weapon from inside a neighboring country or providing a trusted surrogate (such as Hizballah or Shiite groups inside Iraq) with a nuclear weapon and short range delivery means.

[5] Quest, First Strike, p. 46.

T'is Madness but There's a Method in It

The rationalist and centralist nature of decision making in the US and USSR and the effective neutralization of nuclear policy from public pressures during the Cold War allowed policy makers to develop rational strategies and ever-stronger constraints against confrontation. It may be argued that the Middle Eastern regimes are no less rational, and therefore, will not embark on a course that will lead to their utter destruction. This is the gist of Anthony Cordesman's thesis that given the nuclear balance between Israel and Iran for the short and medium term, and Israel's theatre-defense, "counter-force", "counter-population" and "counter-value" strikes would not be an option for Iran, a first strike against Israel would have marginal value and while Israeli recovery would be possible, Iranian recovery after a massive Israeli strike would not be. Hence, it would be suicidal for Iran to embark on the road to nuclear confrontation with Israel.[6]

This argument suffers from two key flaws. First of all, rationality of the players is no guarantee of a rational outcome. As former US Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara pointed out ("Fog of War") regarding the Cuban missile crisis: "Kennedy was rational, Khrushchev was rational, Castro was rational, rational individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies". Secondly, the ability of the US and USSR leaderships to make decisions on strategic issues with minimal "irrational" input was much greater than that of the regimes in the Middle East. Strategic decision making was effectively separated from domestic pressures. Leaders in Washington and Moscow did not have to take into account crowds in their respective capitals demonstrating - as they have in Pakistan - with models of nuclear bombs and calling to use them against historic enemies or with apocalyptic or suicidal traditions. The leaders of both countries identified with their constituent populations enough so that they could be deterred by "counter- population" and "counter-value" threats.

In both these aspects, the Middle East differs. The predominance of religion and honor in Middle Eastern culture sets it apart. The history of the Middle East is replete with chronicles of catastrophes foretold; leaders who brought their nations to - and beyond - the brink of catastrophe with decisions fueled by domestic pressures, honor, existential hostility (Arab- Iranian/Sunni-Shiite/Arab-Jewish) and religion. Religious and nationalistic fervor have led Arab countries to countless military debacles and regimes in the Middle East have shown a predilection for brinkmanship and for perseverance in conflicts despite rational considerations against such behavior. A case in point is the continuation of the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s with enormous costs in human lives and material due to Khomeini's insistence that the elimination of Sadam Hussein is a religious duty and that the war cannot end without achieving that goal. Another case in point is the Arab decisions which precipitated the 1967 Israeli-Arab war with the consequences of the loss of Sinai, the West Bank and the Golan. Sadam Hussein continued to brandish weapons he did not have, in order not to lose face within the region even at the price of providing the US and its allies with a casus belli.

There are no grounds to believe that the possession of nuclear weapons will fundamentally change these patterns of behavior. The level of identification of the regimes and the leaderships with the populations that would bear the brunt of a nuclear exchange also plays a pivotal role in their risk-calculus. For many of these leaders "counter-population" and "counter-force" have little significance;

[6] Anthony H. Cordesman, Iran, Israel, and Nuclear War, PowerPoint presentation. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), November 19,2007

victory or defeat is measured alone by their own survival. A sectarian regime with little identification for the population that may be targeted is more likely to adopt an "après moi le deluge" attitude and to engage in nuclear brinkmanship.

The role of religion in this regard certainly defies comparison with either Judaeo-Christian or East Asian culture. Islamic clerics and legal scholars do not refer to weapons of mass destruction from the same vantage point of utter taboo that has become the rule in the West. The lack of distinction in Islamic law of war (Jihad) between "combatants" who may be killed and "non- combatants" who may not be harmed[7] makes utter rejection of use of such weapons legally untenable. Sunni Islamic scholars widely agree that acquisition of nuclear weapons is at least permissible if not obligatory for Muslim states, on the grounds that they are obliged to maintain parity if not superiority over "the enemy", and to "make the enemies of the Ummah tremble". A fatwa by the Saudi Sheikh Nasser bin Hamid al Fahd in May 2003[8] concludes that use of such weapons against the United States may be seen as "obligatory", based on various verses in the Koran which allow the Muslims to use against their enemies any type of weapons that the enemy possesses and on the Islamic code of *lex talionis*.[9]

Shiite political-legal thought is not very different.[10] While, upon his accession to power in 1979, Khomeini suspended the Shah's nuclear program, the nuclear program was revived while Khomeini was still alive on the basis of "expediency" (to counter the Iraqi nuclear program). During negotiations with the international community over the Iranian nuclear program, the Iranian negotiator Sirus Naseri released the "news" (14 September 2005) that the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamanei had issued a fatwa (ostensibly a verbal fatwa during Friday prayers) declaring the use of nuclear weapons as "*haram*" - forbidden by Islamic law. However, the wording of Khamanei's purported fatwa was not published by the Office of the Leader and was nowhere to be found in the Iranian media. This raises serious questions regarding its very existence. This constructive ambiguity leaves the regime the option to justify brandishing and use of nuclear weapons if the occasion arises.

One aspect of the influence of religion is difficult to assess: the role of apocalyptic beliefs and putative direct communication with the deity or His emissary. The claims by the re-elected Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad that he communicates with the Hidden Imam should be taken seriously. Even if he himself has doubts regarding the real nature of the epiphany that he has experienced, the claim that he has received "extended assurances" from Heaven can seriously constrain his capacity to retreat from potential conflict. The eminent scholar of Middle Eastern culture and politics, Prof. Bernard Lewis has argued that presenting a threat of destruction to a leader or leadership group which fervently believes in the imminence of the apocalypse would not be a threat but a promise. Muslim belief - both Sunni and Shiite - in the appearance of a Mahdi who will fight on the side of Allah's soldiers - if only they show themselves worthy of Him by proving that they rely only on divine provenance - heightens the risk. Even without going as far as imputing apocalyptic goals to regional leaders - it may be argued that their domestic posturing as believing in such goals or in claiming divine protection from any devastating reprisal from the enemy win feed the potential for escalation.

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[7] Prof. Ella Landau Tasseron, "Non-Combatants" in Muslim Legal Thought, Monograph, Hudson Institute, December 2006.
[8] Sheikh Nasr bin Hamid al Fahd, *Risalah fi hukam istikhadam aslihat al-damar al-shamal didh al-kuffar*, "A Treatise on the Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction against Infidels," 1 May 2003
[9] The Sheikh of al-Azhar Muhammad Tantawi drew an analogy from the ruling of the Caliph Abu Bakr "to fight the enemy with a sword if he rights with a sword and ... with a spear if he fights with a spear". Therefore, if the enemy uses a nuclear bomb, it is the duty of the Muslims to use it.http://www.islamonlinc.nei/iol-arabic/dowalia/alhadaih-17-ll/alhadallfl.asp, November 17,1999.
[10] Shmuel Bar, Iranian Defense Doctrine and Decision Making, Institute for Policy and Strategy, October, 2004, p. 51.

Command and Control

Even were we to assume the consummate rationality of the elite decision making of all parties involved, decision implementation calls for rigid hierarchal controls and safeguards over nuclear arsenals. For much of the Cold War, it was believed that possession of nuclear weapons imposes on its owners such rigid forms of command and control, independent from the cultural traditions and conventional military command and control structures in that country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became evident that this assumption was not true, and that culture affects command and control in both conventional and non-conventional areas[11]. The controls that developed in the US, UK and France were different in key aspects to those which were implemented in the USSR or PRC.

The litmus test of a command and control system is in time of international crisis on one hand, and in circumstances of disintegration of other authorities of the state on the other hand. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Soviet leadership provided assurances to the United States that the nuclear arsenal remained under control. True, the Soviet control left much to be desired, however, throughout the turbulences since the fall of the Soviet Union, no nuclear "coups d'etats" have taken place, not to mention use of nuclear weapons in internal conflicts. We cannot be sure that this will be the case in the Middle East. A nuclear state in this region falling apart or being threatened by civil war may result in nuclear weapons falling into the hands of different factions. *Coups d'état* in the Middle East have rarely resulted in the leaders of the former regime being put out to pasture peacefully. The struggle between the different factions is one for life and death and it is conceivable that one side may use nuclear weapons as a last ditch option against its rival.

Key features of nuclear command and control structures as they evolved during the Cold War in the US and the Soviet Union include:

- **Highly centralized systems** with criteria for delegation of authority which reflects the state's level of reliance on the operational units that authority should be delegated to. It should be noted that western nations tended to adopt more delegative models, whereas the Soviet Union and China tended to centralism; American aircraft and ships regularly carried nuclear weapons, whereas Soviet aircraft never carried them outside of Soviet airspace

- **Subordination of the "military" to the "civilian" lines of command** - both western and Soviet structures stressed the civilian command over nuclear weapons; however the West - and particularly the US - tended to have more faith in the discipline and loyalty to the civilian authority of their military command. According to a senior negotiator in the SALT talks, his Soviet counterpart once took him aside and told him that nuclear weapons are much too important to leave them in the hands of military men. India, too felt at the beginning that nuclear weapons are much too serious to leave to the army and it took them a long time until they were willing to let the army be involved in the nuclear command and control arrangements. The Chinese PLA, on the other hand, plays a political role and during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese military warned the political leaders to keep away from their nuclear installations.

- **Clear separation between R&D organizations and operational command.** The Manhattan project was dismantled less than a year and a half after Hiroshima, its R&D functions transferred to the

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[11] See Keith Payne, Deterrence in the second nuclear age, (Lcxington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997)

United States Atomic Energy Commission and the weapons moved into the hands of the military under Presidential authority,

- **Reliance on technical safeguards against theft, sabotage or unauthorized use of weapons**, as oppose to systems based on "human safeguards". US technical safeguards have always been much more sophisticated than those of the Soviet bloc and it stands to reason that the new nuclear powers in the Middle East will rely for the first stage on human-oriented safeguards.

In all these characteristics, the Middle Eastern countries are fundamentally different to the two superpowers of the Cold War. It seems likely that most regimes in the Middle East will not be able to adopt "delegative" models of command and control:

- While these regimes are commonly viewed as autocratic and centralist, they are, in fact, "polycratic" and multi-polar. Consequently, strategic decisions cannot be taken without due multi-lateral "consultation". On the institutional level, leaders in the region tend to encourage redundancy and competition between military and security organizations as a means of enhancing its own control, thus according those organizations inordinate influence on strategic decision making. The leaders will probably be wary not to strengthen any one apparatus by giving it a unique status in the decision process regarding use of nuclear weapons. On the social level, regimes in the region tend to be "tribal", representing one component of Iraqi society and willing to sacrifice others. The Iraqi regime of Sadam Hussein was an excellent example of this, but the Saudi - and other Arab Gulf - regimes are also typical of this phenomenon.

- Due to the experience in the region of military coups, most regimes will not be willing to relinquish central control and to delegate authority to the military units. In times of calm, this is no problem; in times of tension, it severely restricts the ability of the regime to develop doctrines of graduated response or to maintain escalation dominance.

- R&D organizations in these countries will probably not relinquish control over the weapons. Unlike the case of the Manhattan project, the A.Q. Khan apparatus continued to play a major role in the nuclear policy of the country, while maintaining its own proliferation network, independent of any "national" decision making process. This pattern will probably be followed in Iran, where the IRGC is already involved in R&D and will probably continue to have operational control over any weapons.

- At least in the early stages of nuclearization of the region, it is doubtful that the countries of the region will integrate into their systems the doctrines of command and control and the wide range of technical safeguards that evolved in the US and the Soviet Union over decades of Cold War.

Conclusion

Since Hiroshima, the world has become accustomed to defining the "use" of nuclear weapons in terms of their most devastating consequences - attacks on large urban civilian populations. The shadow of Hiroshima and the taboo on use of nuclear weapons loomed not only over their strategic against civilian populations but also over a broad gamut of uses of nuclear weapons: the use of small low yield tactical weapons against military targets (even when such use may, under certain circumstances of low yield weapons used against fortified military targets even reduce collateral damage); testing of nuclear weapons near the borders of political adversaries; or brandishing nuclear weapons in the context of conventional conflicts.

It is safe to assume that the leaders and peoples of the region have no desire to be the targets of nuclear blasts. However the inherent instability of the region and its regimes, the difficulty in managing multi-lateral nuclear tensions, the weight of religious, emotional and internal pressures and the proclivity of many of the regimes in the region towards military adventurism and brinkmanship do not bode well for the future of this region once it enters the nuclear age. The countries of the region will probably be more predisposed than the Cold War protagonists to brandish their nuclear weapons not only rhetorically but through nuclear alerts or nuclear tests in order to deter their enemies, leading to situations of multi-lateral nuclear escalation. Once one country has taken such measures, the other nuclear countries of the region would probably feel forced to adopt defensive measures, leading to multi-lateral escalation. However, such multi-lateral escalation will not be mitigated by Cold War type hotlines and means of signaling and none of the parties involved will have escalation dominance. This and the absence of a credible second strike capability may well strengthen the tendency to opt for a first strike.