

U.S. Deterrence in a More Multipolar Middle East

Does a diminished U.S. strategic focus on the Middle East make nuclear proliferation more likely? And if nuclear proliferation did occur on the wake of a U.S. pullout, how would it likely unfold? To better understand these issues, CSIS held a tabletop exercise with 14 regional experts, followed by structured interviews with 20 regional and subject matter experts. CSIS found that, over the next five years, no outside country other than the United States is likely to matter much in a proliferation scenario, and even so, U.S. influence on events would be quite limited. The most important determinant of how events unfolded would likely be the ongoing quality of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

SCENARIO

The tabletop game was set in 2027. The United States had been steadily withdrawing troops from the Middle East, and nuclear negotiations with Iran had been abandoned a year before. Suddenly, Iran tested a nuclear device. Two months later, Israel flew F-35 jets to destroy Iran's nuclear weapons capability, reportedly using its own low-yield nuclear weapons to do so.

The CSIS game and the follow-up interviews were designed to understand how key actors would respond to this scenario: Iran, Israel, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), China, the E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), Russia, and the United States.

REACTIONS

While the immediate threat of all-out nuclear war appeared low in the aftermath of the scenario, the longer-term risk of proliferation and escalation remained high.

Iran

Most experts thought Iran was likely to seek to avoid a nuclear war with Israel. Participants in the game believed Iran would go into negotiation mode while seeking to vilify Israel for using nuclear weapons; most interviewees argued Iran would feel compelled to unleash proxy forces for fear of appearing weak.

Israel

The Iranian test scrambled the Israeli side and made it doubt the quality of its intelligence on Iran, inhibiting an immediate Israeli response. Once Israel bombed Iran—a function of the game design and not the experts' choice—Israel went into a defensive

crouch, improving its missile defense systems and eagerly seeking to sway Russia and China from sympathy toward Iran.

The United States

The United States had a well-choreographed (and given the experience of the game players and experts, perhaps well-rehearsed) set of responses. Public and private messages were sent, international institutions were engaged, and force postures were tweaked. Yet, once events were underway, the U.S. efforts didn't do much to drive others to action. After the Israeli strike, U.S. actors assessed that a breakdown of communication between the United States and Israel had led to the escalation. The United States issued a threat to Iran, articulating the consequences of an Iranian escalation, while increasing engagement with Israel to develop a joint response to Iranian attacks and to fill intelligence gaps on Iran's nuclear capabilities.

REACTIONS

Europe and the GCC

Leading European powers were alarmed, but they were not consequential militarily or diplomatically. The GCC states were largely passive in the immediate term. In the longer term, they were more likely to explore their own proliferation programs, either alone or with foreign partners.

Russia and China

Perhaps most worryingly, Russia and China were perturbed by the events unfolding in the Middle East, but the principal motivation of each was to undermine U.S. global standing rather than help ensure that the number of nuclear-capable states remains small. For both, their drive to overstretch, weaken, and undermine the United States proved a greater strategic priority than nonproliferation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. No country other than the United States would step forward to provide security guarantees to regional states. Even if the United States sought to leave the Middle East, no country would be willing or able to step in—either to supplement the U.S. role or replace it. The likely result is the United States would be forced back into the Gulf.

2. The United States' greatest influence in a proliferation scenario is its ability to shape Israeli actions. Arguably, that ability is strongest before the scenario even unfolds. The single most important determinant of U.S. influence is the personal relationship and trust developed between the U.S. president and the Israeli prime minister. While institutional relationships and intelligence sharing can support this relationship, they cannot replace it. At the same time, unquestioning support for Israel could make Israel more aggressive, and perhaps more reckless, in its actions.

3. Current U.S. nonproliferation policy, despite its shortcomings, is producing some positive outcomes. Most participants judged Iran more likely to remain on the threshold of a nuclear capability than to cross it, and they thought Israel would be cautious about alienating the United States in its response. Whether such conditions would hold in the longer term is unclear, but the medium term is favorable to the United States.

4. If Russia uses nuclear weapons in Ukraine, the global reaction will have a profound impact shaping Iran's calculus about proliferation. There was universal agreement that a Russian use of a nuclear weapon would transform regional calculations, and U.S. responses to the first use of nuclear weapons must appreciate how closely potential Middle East proliferators will be watching.