Deterring the "Exquisite Diplomat":
Unpacking the Complexities of U.S.-Iran Deterrence Dynamics

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

Key Points

- The U.S. has had varying degrees of success in deterring Iran and its allies across the elements of national power.
- The U.S. deterrence strategies towards Iran have evolved over time, reflecting the shifting priorities and approaches of successive administrations.
- There are several reasons why the effectiveness of the U.S. deterrence efforts can be questioned.
- There are parallels between the U.S. deterrence strategies against Iran and the USSR.
- Iran is deterring the U.S. as well.

Introduction

The effectiveness of U.S. deterrence against Iran and its allies varies across different realms of power. In the military realm, the U.S., particularly through CENTCOM, has been relatively successful in deterring Iran. However, in other realms like diplomacy and economics, it is Iran that seems to be deterring rather than being deterred. During his testimony to Congress, USCENTCOM Commander, General Kurilla, stated that the key to establishing deterrence with Iran is ensuring there are consequences for their actions. He highlighted a specific instance where the U.S. conducted an attack against 85 targets, including killing the Kata'ib Hezbollah commander for Syria, al-Saadi. This action sent a strong deterrent message, resulting in no attacks in Iraq and Syria for 32 days. At the same time, General Kurilla emphasized that while deterrence can be effective, it is temporary in nature.[1] "Iran never won a war, but never lost a negotiation!" was tweeted by former President Donald Trump on January 3, 2020.[2] This statement

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[1] US DoD Transcript, "Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2025 and The Future Years," *US Central Command*, March 8, 2024, https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3700887/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-posture-of-united-states-central-comman/ (accessed March 8, 2024).

[2] Mike Calia, "Trump tweets after US kills Iranian general: 'He should have been taken out many years ago!'," *CNBC*, January 3, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/03/trump-tweets-iran-never-won-a-war-but-never-lost-a-negotiation.html (accessed August 2021).

reflects the perception of the regime in Tehran as an exquisite diplomat who has found a way to evade sanctions,[3] maintain a strong position in the region, and stretch its influence and activities globally.

At the same time, the government in Tehran has developed its own highly effective deterrence mechanism via plausible deniability and diplomacy of terror. This paper discusses the interplay between Iran's nuclear ambiguity, its ability to circumvent economic sanctions, and the perception of the Iranian threat by regional countries. It argues that these factors, combined with the varied success of U.S. deterrence across different realms of power, contribute to the challenges faced by the U.S. in deterring Iran effectively. The paper is organized in a way to explore the evolution of U.S. deterrence towards Iran, the effectiveness and the challenges of U.S. deterrence, and how Iran is countering U.S. deterrence.

The Evolution of U.S. Deterrence Strategies Towards Iran

Deterrence: Approaches and Theories. The concept of deterrence is central to national security strategies, as it aims to prevent undesirable actions, such as war or crime, through the threat of adverse consequences. The lexical meaning of deterrence emphasizes the act or process of preventing a particular action or behavior from happening, especially by instilling fear of the consequences. The classic literature on deterrence theory distinguishes between two fundamental approaches:[4]

> 1. Deterrence by denial: This strategy seeks to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives. This could involve deploying sufficient local military forces to defeat a potential invasion, for example.

> 2. Deterrence by punishment: This approach threatens severe penalties, such as nuclear escalation or severe economic sanctions if an attack occurs. These penalties are connected to the local fight and the wider consequences.

Deterrence can be employed in two sets of circumstances: direct deterrence, which consists of efforts by a state to prevent attacks on its own territory, and extended deterrence, which involves discouraging attacks on third parties, such as allies or partners. The theoretical literature also distinguishes between general deterrence, the ongoing, persistent effort to prevent unwanted actions over the long term and in non-crisis situations, and immediate deterrence, which represents more short-term, urgent attempts to prevent a specific, imminent attack, typically during a crisis. Additionally, various theories of deterrence have been developed, including rational deterrence theory, which focuses on the cost-benefit analysis of the deterrer and the attacker, and nuclear deterrence theory, which is related to the concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD).[5] Interwar deterrence theory, on the other hand, focuses on controlling substantial military escalation during an ongoing war, aiming to prevent the adversary from escalating the conflict beyond critical thresholds.

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[3] Kimberly Donovan, Maia Nikoladze, Ryan Murphy, and Yulia Bychkovska, "Global Sanctions Dashboard: How Iran Evades Sanctions and Finances Terrorist Organizations Like Hamas," October 26, 2023, *Atlantic Council*, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/global-sanctions-dashboard-how-iran-evades-sanctions-and-finances-terrorist-organizations-like-hamas/ (accessed May 6, 2024).

[4] "Deterrence," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deterrence (accessed April 17, 2024); Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," RAND Corp., 2018, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf (accessed August 15, 2022).

[5] "What Is Deterrence?" *Foreign Policy*, May 24, 2023, https://world101.cfr.org/foreign-policy/tools-foreign-policy/what-deterrence (accessed April 18, 2024).

The Evolution of U.S. Deterrence Strategies Towards Iran. The United States' deterrence strategies towards Iran have evolved over time, reflecting the shifting priorities and approaches of successive administrations. During the initial period (*shortly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979*),[6] the U.S. had an effective deterrence strategy that combined military pressure with diplomatic, informational, and economic actions. This strategy brought Iran to the negotiating table and prevented regional conflict between Iran and Israel. However, the Obama administration's focus shifted towards pursuing a diplomatic resolution to Iran's nuclear program, while maintaining sanctions.[7] President Trump's administration took a more confrontational approach, seeking to "rally the world against the rogue regime in Iran" and work with allies to "deny the Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear weapon and neutralize Iranian malign influence."[8] This included enhancing missile defense systems and increasing counterterrorism and cybersecurity cooperation with U.S. allies in the Middle East (ME), particularly Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.[9] The current Biden administration has sought to "enhance deterrence toward Iran" while pursuing diplomacy to ensure Iran cannot acquire a nuclear weapon. However, Iran has been able to exploit perceived U.S. weakness and unwillingness to escalate, using regional proxies to target U.S. interests and partners, undermining U.S. deterrence credibility.[10] The challenge of deterring Iran has become a principal theme in U.S. defense policy. Successful deterrence requires taking the aggressor's motivations seriously, being clear about what the defender seeks to deter and what it will do if the threat is challenged and demonstrating both the capability and determination to fulfill a threat.

Assessing the Effectiveness of U.S. Deterrence

The effectiveness of deterrence strategies against Iran can be influenced by various factors, and there are several reasons why some may argue that U.S. deterrence efforts have not been entirely successful.

Historical Context. Iran has a long history of resilience and defiance against external pressure, dating back to its revolution in 1979. This history has shaped Iran's perception of itself as a regional power and its resistance to what it sees as foreign interference or intimidation.[11]

Domestic Politics. The Iranian government often uses anti-American rhetoric and portrays the U.S. as an imperialist aggressor to maintain domestic support and legitimacy. This narrative can make it politically challenging for Iranian

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[6] Suzanne Maloney, "Addressing Iran's Evolving Threats to US Interests," *Brookings*, September 15, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/addressing-irans-evolving-threats-to-us-interests/ (accessed May 6, 2024).

[7] US National Security Strategy 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf

[8] US National Security Strategy 2017, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf

[9] Christopher J. Bolan, "The US Is Trying to Restore Deterrence in the Gulf. That Won't be Enough," *Defense One*, October 6, 2019, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/10/us-trying-restore-deterrence-gulf-wont-be-enough/160394/ (accessed May 6, 2024).

[10] US National Security Strategy 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf

[11] William J. Burns, Michèle A. Flournoy, Jarrett Blanc, Elisa Catalano Ewers, Ilan Goldenberg, Ariel (Eli) Levite, Elizabeth Rosenberg, Karim Sadjadpour, "Contain, Enforce, and Engage: An Integrated U.S. Strategy to Address Iran's Nuclear and Regional Challenges," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 26, 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/10/26/contain-enforce-and-engage-integrated-u.s.-strategy-to-address-iran-s-nuclear-and-regional-challenges-pub-73484 (accessed August 15, 2022).

leaders to engage in dialogue or compromise with the U.S. without appearing weak or capitulating to foreign pressure.[12]

Economic Resilience. While U.S. sanctions have undoubtedly harmed Iran's economy, they have also prompted the government to seek alternative sources of revenue, develop domestic industries, and establish trade partnerships with other countries, including China and Russia. This economic resilience has mitigated some of the intended effects of U.S. sanctions.[13]

Regional Ambitions. Iran seeks to assert itself as a regional power in the ME and plays an active role in supporting proxies and allies in conflicts across the region, including in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. These activities are part of Iran's broader strategy to expand its influence and deter perceived threats from neighboring countries and the U.S.[14]

Nuclear Program. The Iranian government views its nuclear program as a matter of national pride and security, which complicates efforts to deter Iran from pursuing nuclear capabilities. Despite international pressure and sanctions, Iran has continued to develop its nuclear program, albeit with some constraints imposed by agreements such as the JCPOA.[15]

Perception of U.S. Resolve. Iran may perceive U.S. deterrence threats as lacking credibility or consistency, particularly given shifts in U.S. foreign policy priorities and disagreements among U.S. allies regarding the best approach to dealing with Iran. This perception can undermine the effectiveness of deterrence efforts.[16] Overall, the complex nature of U.S.-Iran relations, combined with Iran's historical, political, and strategic considerations, makes it challenging to achieve complete success in deterring Iran through traditional means such as military threats or economic sanctions. Effective deterrence requires a nuanced understanding of Iran's motivations and interests, as well as a comprehensive strategy that addresses both security concerns and opportunities for diplomatic engagement.

Challenges to Effective Deterrence

The U.S. has employed various deterrence strategies towards Iran over the past 30 years, yet it has struggled to find an effective long-term approach to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional influence. Inconsistencies in the U.S. foreign policy towards Iran, such as withdrawing from the JCPOA and then wanting to return, have provided Iran with opportunities to gain time and maneuver. This up-and-down nature of U.S. policy towards Iran has been a significant factor in the limited success of current deterrence efforts.

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[12] Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, "The Soft War: Understanding Iran's Domestic Ideological Crisis," *Critical Threats*, October 10, 2023, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-soft-war-understanding-irans-domestic-ideological-crisis (accessed April 18, 2024).

[13] Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "Iran's economy, so far resilient, now faces ultimate test," *Responsible Statecraft*, January 31, 2024, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/iran-economy/ (accessed April 18, 2024).

[14] Ibid 8.

[15] "Iran and Nuclear Weapons Production," *Congressional Research Service*, March 20, 2024, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12106 (accessed April 1, 2024).

[16] Bilal Y. Saab, "US deterrence against Iran is damaged but not dead,"*Chatham House,*January 3, 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/us-deterrence-against-iran-damaged-not-dead (accessed April 18, 2024).

It is important to recognize that the success of deterring Iran cannot be achieved solely through military means. While military presence can provide support, diplomatic and economic efforts are crucial components of an effective deterrence strategy. Additionally, China's provision of economic support to Iran, taking advantage of its economic depression, has undermined the impact of sanctions imposed on Iran.[17]

The role of cyberspace in deterring Iran has also not been explored to its fullest. The Stuxnet virus attack in 2010, which delayed Iran's nuclear program by 18-24 months, demonstrates the potential impact of cyber capabilities in deterrence efforts.[18]

The success of U.S. deterrence against the USSR during the Cold War was due to a combination of factors, including a strong domestic consensus, effective escalation management, clear intelligence and threat recognition, and the development of overwhelming military capabilities.[19] While there are parallels between the U.S. strategies against Iran and the USSR, such as the use of deterrence, alliances, and military capabilities, there are also significant differences due to the unique nature of each adversary and the specific geopolitical contexts involved (see Table 1).

Factors	U.S.-USSR	U.S.- IRAN
Nature of Adversary	The Soviet Union was a superpower rival to the U.S., with significant military, economic, and ideological capabilities	Iran is not a superpower but rather a regional actor with ambitions for influence in the Middle East
Nuclear Factor	The primary focus of U.S. deterrence against the USSR was nuclear deterrence, based on the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD)	Iran's nuclear program has been a concern for the U.S. and its allies, the nature of deterrence is different due to the absence of a direct nuclear parity between the two countries
Alliances	The U.S. built strong alliances with Western European countries and other nations through organizations like NATO to counter Soviet influence	U.S. alliances in the Middle East are more fragmented, with tensions and rivalries among regional actors complicating efforts to form a unified front against Iran
Ideological Dimension	The Cold War was characterized by an ideological struggle between communism and capitalism, which influenced both domestic politics and international relations	While there is an ideological dimension to the contest, it's not on a global scale. Instead, it is more focused on regional power dynamics, security concerns, and geopolitical interests

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[17] Zhan, Yuheng, Business Insider, "How China has helped Russia and Iran evade Western sanctions, according to a think tank" Mar 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/china-russia-iran-economy-outlook-help-assistance-western-sanctions-oil-2024-3, (accessed Apr 16, 2024).

[18] Zetter, Kim, Wired News, "An Unprecedented Look at Stuxnet, the World's First Digital Weapon", Nov 2014, https://www.wired.com/2014/11/countdown-to-zero-day-stuxnet/ (accessed Apr 16, 2024).

[19] Saab, Bilal, Chatham House, "US deterrence against Iran is damaged but not dead", Jan 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/us-deterrence-against-iran-damaged-not-dead (accessed Apr 15, 2024).

Military Posture	The U.S. maintained a significant military presence in Europe and around the world to deter Soviet aggression, including forward-deployed forces, military exercises, and strategic alliances	U.S. military posture in the Middle East is focused on regional security challenges, such as countering terrorism and ensuring freedom of navigation in the Arabian Gulf

Table 1. "Deter USSR vs. Deter Iran." Source: CSAG, April 2024.

How Iran is countering U.S. Deterrence

Iran deters as well. To understand the effectiveness of one's own deterrence efforts, it is first necessary to comprehend how the adversary's deterrence is structured and what makes it effective. The RAND Corporation terms the Iranian Threat Network (ITN) as "Iran's primary means of power projection and a potent deterrent against the U.S. and its allies in the region."[20] Studying Iran's long-standing strategy and observing Tehran's current behavior, four additional deterrent elements can be discerned: Iran's missile arsenal, Tehran's policy of nuclear ambiguity, Iran's ability to evade economic sanctions, and Tehran's obstinacy in pursuing its regional expansionism. Participation in the so-called "New Axis of Evil"[21] serves Iran to bypass sanctions and expand its influence. This concept takes on greater significance when considering the three elements as a whole: the ITN, missile and nuclear capabilities, which can be viewed as a system composed of a weapon (conventional or nuclear), an operator (the ITN fighters), and a means of delivery (missiles as carriers). These elements collectively comprise the "armed arm of Iran."[22] Tehran's obstinacy in pursuing its regional expansionism, often referred to as the "Persian Race," can be considered another deterrent.

The Iranian regime, with great patience and in a measured way, advances its interests exploratively, crossing a red line but controlling escalation and at the same time influencing the outcome. The most significant example of the Iranian regime crossing several red lines with without facing significant consequences, is that Iran has continued to advance its nuclear program despite international calls to suspend uranium enrichment activities.[23] Iran has gone on to produce uranium hexafluoride (UF6) at the Uranium Conversion Facility (UCF) in Esfahan and begin enriching uranium at its Natanz facility.[24] More recently, Iran has crossed a red line by launching a direct military attack on Israel from its own territory. In April 2024, Iran conducted an unprecedented strike involving over 300 drones and missiles against Israel, marking the first time Iran has directly attacked Israel militarily rather than relying on proxy groups.[25] The lack of clear, enforceable red lines has allowed Iran to incrementally advance its capabilities and influence in the region. Iran's sophisticated approach throughout the years, towards Arab countries paid off,

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[20] Omer Carmi, "Deconstructing and Countering Iran's Threat Network," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2017, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/1639?disposition=inline (accessed August 2021).

[21] Axis of evil, expression used to describe the bellicose tendencies of Iran, North Korea, and Iraq in the early 21st century. The phrase was coined by Canadian-born US presidential speechwriter David Frum and presidential aide Michael Gerson for use by US President George W. Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address, *Britannica,* March 21, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/axis-of-evil (accessed April 17, 2024).

[22] Ibid 21.

[23] Eisenstadt, Michael, National Defense University Press, "Iran's Gray Zone Strategy: Cornerstone of its Asymmetric Way of War" Mar 2021, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2541911/irans-gray-zone-strategy-cornerstone-of-its-asymmetric-way-of-war/ (accessed Apr 15, 2024).

[24] Eric Brewer and Nicholas L. Miller, "A Redline for Iran?" December 23, 2021, *Foreign Affairs*, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2021-12-23/redline-iran (accessed May 6, 2024).

[25] Suzannah George, "Iran crosses old red lines and sets 'new equation' with attack on Israel," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/14/iran-israel-attack-missiles-drones/ (accessed May 6, 2024).

resulting in some Arab countries restricting U.S. activities against Iran from their soil and refusing to open their airspace to Israeli and U.S. aircraft during the Iran attack on Israel.[26]

The Iranian Center of Gravity. Center of Gravity (COG) analysis can be a useful tool to understand effectiveness of the key deterrents of Iran.[27] The Iranian Center of Gravity (COG) is a complex and multifaceted entity, with both political and military components. Understanding and addressing these critical capabilities and vulnerabilities is crucial for effectively engaging with and countering Iran's influence in the region. After careful analysis, the CSAG identified the Supreme leader (and the regime doctrine of "velāyat-e faqīh") as the Iranian political COG.[28] This is due to the ability to have absolute command and complete control over the regular army and the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC). He controls the state's economic capabilities, formulates the country's foreign policy, and has final decision in international relations. However, a critical vulnerability of this political COG is a lack of acceptance, especially among younger demographics. CSAG analysis indicates that the IRGC can be considered as the military COG of Iran.[29] The IRGC is particularly valued for its abilities to: project power and influence across the ME and beyond, wage asymmetric warfare, utilize decentralized command, control, and communications (C3), strategic planning and adaptability, and influence the Iranian economic and political domains. For the IRGC to be successful, very often it needs the ITN as its operational tool, as an enabler. In relations with the ITN, the IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) plays a special role for the IRGC as its foreign wing. The proxies are often driven by their own charismatic leaders and often have their own agendas, ideologies, and leadership structures that do not always align with Iran's strategic calculations. Consequently, the solidity of maintaining a command-and-control function over the proxies is uncertain. This concern became more prominent for the IRGC since the death of Qassem Soleimani, as current IRGC-QF commander, Esmail Qaani, reportedly has less control and esteem. The IRGC-QF role is concerned with sustainment of the proxy groups' ideological alignment with Iran's revolutionary principles, as it is often impossible to fight ideology.[30]

The ITN as Iran's deterring force. The ITN is a powerful tool for Iran, serving as a "Swiss Army knife" due to its flexibility and adaptability.[31] The ITN operates on both a military/operational level as well as a "Dawah" level (proselytization), seeking to recruit from Shia communities worldwide, especially where central governments are weak.[32] The ITN can be broken down into four categories: "Targeters," "Deterrers," "Stabilizers," and "Influencers,"

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[26] Lara Seligman, Alexander Ward and Nahal Toosi, "UAE Restricts US Ability to Launch Retaliatory Airstrikes Against Iran Proxies," *Politico*, February 14, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/14/united-arab-emirates-retaliatory-airstrikes-iran-00141460 (accessed April 23, 2024); Middle East Monitor, "Saudi Arabia and UAE Refused to Open Airspace to Israeli and US Aircraft During Iran Attack," April 17, 2024, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240417-saudi-arabia-and-uae-refused-to-open-airspace-to-israeli-and-us-aircraft-during-iran-attack/ (accessed April 23, 2024).

[27] Daniel J. Smith, Kelley Jeter, Odin Westgaard, "Three Approaches to Center of Gravity Analysis: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," *National Defense University Press*, July 1, 2015, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/607722/three-approaches-to-center-of-gravity-analysis-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-th/ (accessed April 16, 2024).

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Akbar Khan, Han Zhaoying, "Iran-Hezbollah Alliance Reconsidered: What Contributes to the Survival of State-Proxy Alliance?," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 2020, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2347797020906654 (accessed May 7, 2024).

[31] Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser, "The Iran Threat Network (ITN). Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships," *RAND Corporation*, 2021, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND_RR4231.pdf (accessed August 2021).

[32] Eitan Azani, Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, Danny Citrinowicz, Dafna Messi, "The Iranian Threat Network and the Export of the Islamic Revolution," *The International Institute for Counterterrorism* (*ICT*), July 2020, https://www.ict.org.il/images/Iranian%20Threat%20Network.pdf (accessed August 2021).

which correspond to the four main strategic effects it serves for Iran: to target, to deter, to stabilize, and to influence.
[33] The ITN groups can morph between these different roles as circumstances change. Furthermore, the ITN extends beyond the ME, with operatives involved in worldwide operations, thus allowing Iran to project its influence globally.
[34] Therefore, the ITN groups can be considered a "power multiplier" for the IRGC and Iran's crucial deterring force. Previously mentioned ideological alignment between Iran and the ITN groups (*see para "The Iranian Center of Gravity"*) is an important factor cementing these relationships. Breaking these ideological bonds would be extremely difficult. This would require not just an alternative offer from Iran's adversaries, but a fundamental shift in the worldview and interests of the proxy groups themselves, which have been shaped over generations. Simply providing incentives may not be enough to overcome the deep-rooted ideological commitment[35].

Conclusion

The "Carrot and Stick" Approach to Iran. Following General Kurilla's view that deterrence is inherently temporary, the U.S. deterrence strategy against Iran should keep pace with, and ideally anticipate, conditions in the region. Keeping up involves a shift in approach, from a largely forceful approach to one that is more diplomatic. Pressure and forceful solutions alone do not always result in an appropriate strategy, and ultimately, cannot deliver true stability and security. Perhaps pairing of pressure and engagement can advance U.S. interests.

Well-executed, constructive engagement could help the U.S. clearly communicate its positions and demands to the Iranian government, demonstrate the U.S. is not the enemy of the Iranian people, and build the multilateral support necessary to effectively address the nuclear and regional challenges. It could also provide valuable intelligence and insight into Iran's calculations, decision-making, and behaviors. The U.S. could gain credibility and authority among its allies, and position itself as resolute, reasonable, and principled in its discourse with Iran, if it shows that it is prepared to take "yes" for an answer.[36] The "carrot and stick" method, with a greater emphasis on the "carrot" in favorable circumstances, may be a prudent approach for dealing with Iran. This strategy could prevent "providing fuel" for the Iranian regime's narrative of an external enemy, which it may leverage to consolidate power and eliminate political opposition.

However, President Obama's "hopeful optimism and an extended hand of friendship" approach to Iran, which combined diplomatic outreach with economic pressure, faced significant challenges.[37] Despite repeated attempts at dialogue, Iran often rebuffed these overtures, potentially undermining President Obama's perceived foreign policy strength. As a result, his stance towards Iran gradually hardened. Given Iran's history of exploiting conciliatory

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[33] Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser, "The Iran Threat Network (ITN). Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships," *RAND Corporation*, 2021, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND_RR4231.pdf (accessed August 2021).

[34] Omer Carmi, "Deconstructing and Countering Iran's Threat Network," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/1639?disposition=inline (accessed August 2021).

[35] Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal, "Iran's Regional Proxies: Reshaping the Middle East and Testing U.S. Policy," *The Institute for Security and Development Policy*, February 27, 2024, https://www.isdp.eu/irans-regional-proxies-reshaping-the-middle-east-and-testing-u-s-policy/ (accessed May 7, 2024).

[36] Jarrett Blanc, Elisa Catalano Ewers, Ilan Goldenberg, Ariel E. Levite, Elizabeth Rosenberg, Karim Sadjadpour, William J. Burns, Michèle A. Flournoy, "CONTAIN, ENFORCE, AND ENGAGE: An Integrated U.S. Strategy to Address Iran's Nuclear and Regional Challenges," Center for a New American Security (CNAS), January 1, 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/10/26/contain-enforce-and-engage-integrated-u.s.-strategy-to-address-iran-s-nuclear-and-regional-challenges-pub-73484 (accessed April 12, 2024).

[37] David Crist, "The Twilight War," (New York, The Penguin Press, 2012), 561.

diplomatic efforts, future strategies may need to acknowledge past failures and adopt a more nuanced approach. This approach should balance engagement with realistic expectations based on historical precedent, avoiding potentially naïve diplomatic attempts that Iran has previously exploited.

This "carrot and stick" approach involves a combination of incentives and deterrents to influence the behavior of a target state. In the context of Iran, this could entail offering economic and diplomatic rewards for cooperation, while maintaining the threat of sanctions or other punitive measures for non-compliance. This approach has been employed in the past with China, where engagement and economic incentives have been used alongside criticism of human rights abuses. History has shown that totalitarian regimes often use the designation of an "archenemy" to consolidate power and eliminate political opposition. By portraying dissidents and critics as threats to the nation, regimes can justify repression and violence under the guise of protecting the country from internal and external enemies. Consequently, the "carrot and stick" approach could help prevent the Iranian regime from exploiting the "archenemy" narrative.

However, the current landscape, characterized by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, raises the question of feasibility for the U.S. to expand its constructive engagement with Iran. Given the volatile nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its regional implications, the prospect of enhanced U.S. engagement with Iran may need to be temporarily deferred. The delicate balance of power and the competing interests at play in the region could make it challenging to pursue such a policy shift in the immediate term. However, it would be unwise to completely rule out the possibility of expanded U.S. constructive engagement with Iran as a long-term strategic option.

Fostering Long-Term Relations in The Region. CENTCOM's deterrence efforts will remain ineffective without an intergovernmental apparatus promoting Arab unity and regional stability over confrontation with Iran. CSAG notes three main areas of action for strengthening U.S. deterrence:

1. Enhancing regional partnerships and security cooperation.
2. Improving coordination and communication of deterrence signals.
3. Maintaining a credible military posture and response options.

Enhancing regional partnerships and security cooperation. In building long-term defense relationships and partnerships in the CENTCOM AOR, it is worth emphasizing the value of the National Guard-administered State Partnership Program (SPP).[38] CENTCOM can continue to utilize and expand the program to foster enduring partnerships with countries in the AOR. CENTCOM can continue to work with regional partners to build their military and security capabilities through security cooperation programs, foreign military sales, and joint training. CENTCOM's hosting of multilateral forums like the Multilateral Maritime Engagement (MME) is another example of a valuable partnership activity that can be sustained and perhaps expanded.[39] Furthermore, while CENTCOM plays

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[38] The SPP is a joint program of the US DoD and the individual US states and territories. It links a state's National Guard with a partner nation's military, security forces, and disaster response organizations. National Guard, https://mil.wa.gov/state-partnership-program (accessed April 2, 2024).

[39] The MME is a symposium hosted by Task Force 51/5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade aimed at fostering multilateral partnerships and enhancing maritime security capabilities within the CENTCOM AOR. Victor Mancilla, "Multilateral Maritime Engagement 24.1: Strengthening Regional Partnerships for Enhanced Stability," *US CENTCOM*, February 23, 2024, https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3685888/multilateral-maritime-engagement-241-strengthening-regional-partnerships-for-en/ (accessed February 23, 2024).

a leading role, safeguarding Sea Lines of Communication in the AOR is a collaborative effort that strengthens partnerships and promotes cooperative security arrangements with nations across CENTCOM's AOR.[40]

Improving coordination and communication of deterrence signals. Information operations (IO) can be prioritized for CENTCOM to disrupt and counter threats from adversaries like Iran. CENTCOM needs to coordinate its IO, cyber activities, and other deterrence efforts closely with the broader U.S. government as well as regional allies and partners. This whole-of-government, integrated approach can strengthen the communication and credibility of U.S. deterrence signals. CENTCOM can continue to build upon its existing IO capabilities, both offensive and defensive, to promote U.S. messaging, counter adversary misinformation and disinformation, and demonstrate U.S. resolve more effectively. CENTCOM's role in conducting joint and combined exercises with regional partners is another important method by which to improve coordination and communication of deterrence signals.[41] These exercises help sustain interoperability, share best practices, and demonstrate U.S. commitment to the region. CENTCOM's military-to-military activities, exercises, and senior leader engagements with regional partners can help demonstrate U.S. commitment, resolve, and deterrence capabilities. These engagements can be leveraged to convey deterrence messages. CENTCOM can further strengthen intelligence-sharing and cooperation with regional partners to enhance situational awareness and collective security.

Maintaining a credible military posture and response options. CENTCOM, to maintain a credible military posture and response options, needs a strong military presence and infrastructure in the region to enable rapid response. Investment in critical capabilities like ISR, precision munitions, and missile defense systems to counter evolving threats is crucial. Given the growing threat of advanced Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities from adversaries, CENTCOM can prioritize expanding its Integrated Air and Missile Defense to better protect U.S. forces and regional partners.[42] This can also help demonstrate the credibility of U.S. deterrence.

The U.S. can deter Iran by leveraging its cyber domain superiority. The U.S. should clearly define what categories of cyber activities it considers intolerable and communicate its intent to retaliate to Iran's leadership through multiple channels. The U.S. should demonstrate it has credible cyber retaliation capabilities, while reserving the right to respond through non-cyber means as well. Additionally, the U.S. should signal to Iran it will hold the Iranian government accountable for the actions of its cyber proxies. At the same time, the U.S. should recognize Iran's legitimate cyber security concerns and include an element of give-and-take in its deterrence strategy. The fractious nature of Iran's political system also raises the risk of escalation and complicates U.S. response options in a cyber environment. Beyond just deterring Iran, the U.S. is also leveraging its cyber capabilities to support broader regional security objectives, for example to counter malign activities by China and Russia, including through information operations and cyber means.[43] Finally, synchronization of cyber and traditional kinetic operations can enhance the overall deterrent effect.

To address the persistent challenge of Iran being the "Exquisite Diplomat," the U.S. must choose a more nuanced deterrence strategy. Enhancing regional partnership, better communicating deterrence, and projecting capable and

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[40] Mark Dubowitz, Orde Kittrie, "Strategy for a New Comprehensive U.S. Policy on Iran," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 2023, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/01/10/strategy-for-a-new-comprehensive-us-policy-on-iran/ (accessed January 12, 2024).

[41] Ibid.

[42] Mark Dubowitz, Orde Kittrie, "Strategy for a New Comprehensive U.S. Policy on Iran," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 2023, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/01/10/strategy-for-a-new-comprehensive-us-policy-on-iran/ (accessed January 12, 2024).

[43] Erica Lonergan, Mark Montgomery, "United States Cyber Force," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 25, 2024, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/03/25/united-states-cyber-force/ (accessed April 24, 2024).

flexible military strength are key steps to confront Iran's destabilizing activities and reduce the risk of escalation. Implementation of these suggestions will allow the U.S. to outmaneuver the "Iranian Diplomat" from continuing its unabated, undermining of regional stability.