Asymmetric Strategies in the Middle East

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Key Points

*   Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan see the Greater Middle East as one theatre of geopolitical competition. They are not pursuing a theatre-by theatre strategy. At the same time, they see US regional strategy as being driven by developments in individual theatres of operation.

*   Iran has taken advantage of the political situations of Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Palestine to pursue a policy of compelling Washington make concessions to it in return for improvement of relations.

*   Saudi Arabia has been increasingly concerned about US support for the Iraqi government. For Saudi Arabia the key issue is containment of Iranian political power and reduction of Iranian influence across the region.

*   Arab states of the Middle East have become dependent on non-Arab powers Turkey, Iran, Israel and Pakistan for their own survival in the regional geopolitical competition.

*   Pakistan is emerging as a pivotal state in the region and its domestic stability and future geopolitical orientation are closely intertwined with the stability of the region.

*   Increasingly, Russia and China are exploiting this dynamic to further their own interests at the expense of the US. Neither power is willing to compartmentalize regional issues.

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King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has warned that the Middle East conflict is likely to have a global impact if it is not resolved.[1] Indeed it is precisely the spectre of a global conflagration that has made the Greater Middle East the central battlefront of geopolitical competition. The Greater Middle East and the Arab world are becoming increasingly dependent on non-Arab powers for their defence. This has been exemplified by Iran and Pakistan being treated cordially by the Arab League. Therefore, resolving the Arab-Israeli issue will not necessarily lead to a de-escalation of regional conflicts, many of which have little or nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Some observers of Middle Eastern politics, most notably Barry Rubin, have observed that for the foreseeable future the conflict in the Middle East will be between nationalism and Islamism. According to Rubin:

> *What has happened now, however, is that radical Islamism has reached a critical mass. It poses serious challenges to Arab nationalism as the leading opposition in every Arabic-speaking country. Islamism plays a key role in governing Iraq; Hamas defeated Fatah on the Palestinian front; and Hizbullah is close to gaining at least equal power in Lebanon. For years, probably decades, to come, the Middle East will be shaken by a titanic battle for control between Arab nationalism and Islamism.[2]*

Rubin, however, seems to be underestimating the degree to which nationalism has become dependent on Islamism for its survival. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there will be a conflict between different types of Islamism, pan-Islamism and local and regional nationalisms. It would be simplistic to argue that all pan-Islamist movements have similar goals and aspirations or that all forms of local nationalism are bound to be averse to pan-Islamist ideas.[3] There are serious differences between the pan-Islamism of Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas and that of Al-Qa'idah. Hezbollah remains first and foremost a Lebanese organization which continues to rely upon Iran for political, economic and military support. Al-Qa'idah has grown into a multinational organization each of whose affiliates may be pursuing its own regional and local agenda. Above all, despite their stated pan-Islamist goals, Hezbollah remains a Shi'i organization, whereas Al-Qa'idah remains a Salafist/Sunni organization. However, what they all have in common is that they pursue a pan-Islamist agenda to justify their pursuit of their local interests, and in order to justify attacks on the external supporters of the governments they are opposing.

In the case of Hezbollah, the organization's commitment to waging a "national liberation struggle" against Israel has also been used to increase Hezbollah's influence in the Lebanese political system. The debate in Hezbollah over whether the organization should give priority to fighting Israel or to Islamizing the Lebanese political system reflected the conflict over the choice of strategy within the organization.[4] Similar tensions were present within various Sunni/Salafist

movements which engaged in a debate over whether to give priority to attacking the US or to fighting their own governments.[5] This is the tension that is likely to constitute the main fault line in the Islamic world. The conflict between different types of Islamist ideology and the degree of violence they are prepared to resort to in pursuit of their goals will probably shape the behaviour of most Middle Eastern governments for years to come.

The Middle East has experimented with different ideologies and all of them have been failures.[6] Sectarianism is emerging as a major force in world politics and will have a global impact. The Iranian regime, including Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, has blamed the US and the West for the emergence of sectarianism in the region.[7] At the same time, Iranian backed groups in Iraq, including both Muqtada al-Sadr and the Supreme Islamic Council see the adoption of an "oil spot" approach to counter-insurgency as beneficial to their own interests because they either escalate the insurgency elsewhere or choose to selectively cooperate with the coalition to defeat their domestic rivals.[8]

The Ahmadinezhad government has combined its asymmetric policies with repression at home and publicly executed its opponents after accusing them of being involved in US-inspired "plots".[9] In fact, it has increasingly linked Iran's foreign and domestic policies. All Iranian factions, be they reformist, conservative or radical, see the Greater Middle East – an area stretching from Central Asia to the Mediterranean – as the central arena of competition between the US and Iran.[10] It is in this context that the geopolitical competition in this region should be analysed.

Challenging the adversary within its own frame of reference

Daniel Byman has argued that because terrorism is a technique of warfare it cannot be eliminated and constant direct US intervention is a costly form of fighting it. Byman has called for US support for counter-terrorism measures by its allies.[11] US allies such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are pursuing a policy of challenging Al-Qa'idah and its affiliates within their own frame of reference. They are encouraging the formation of a de facto alliance between state authorities and religious, nationalist and tribal forces which are opposed to Al-Qa'idah's pan-Islamist ambitions. The strategic logic of this policy is clear. Religious nationalist organizations have their own domestic agendas that clash with that of Al-Qa'idah.[12]

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan see the Iranian regime as the main threat to their regional interests and indeed the stability of their governments. Thus the Iranian asymmetric threat has led them to adopt a policy of co-opting Sunni Islamists for the purpose of waging a counter-insurgency campaign against those who were determined to overthrow the regime.[13] This is a particularly salient example of a strategy-driven approach to counter-ideological warfare. In the 1990s the Egyptian government sought to co-opt Muslim Brotherhood elements in order to isolate members of the Islamic Jihad and Jamat al-Islami. The strategy was aimed at preventing those groups from gaining legitimacy at the grass roots level by offering the Muslim Brotherhood cultural space.[14] This led to the progressive Islamization of Egyptian society and undermined secular values which advocates of democracy promotion see as the sine qua non of fostering democratic ideals in the Middle East. However, by the early 1990s Egypt's close ally, the US, was concerned about the possible emergence of an Islamist regime. Parallels were drawn between the situations in Egypt (and Algeria) and that of Iran in 1979. Back then, wrong analogies were invoked to justify the policy of holding a dialogue with Islamists. Thus it was argued that the US' lack of contact with Khomeini's followers had led to

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the anti-American turn of the Iranian revolution.[15] In fact, the Carter administration had maintained contact with Islamists prior to the Iranian revolution and the anti-American turn in the revolution was caused by an alliance of radical Islamists and leftists who feared that conservative clerics and religious nationalists would continue to maintain Iran's close relations with the US.[16]

Counter-ideology and the inadequacy of the totalitarian model

Traditionally counter-ideology has not been viewed as a strategic deception operation. It falls into the category of propaganda and public diplomacy. However, a counter-ideology campaign is a different proposition altogether. So far, Al-Qa'idah and its affiliates have seen most US and Western counter-ideology campaigns as no different from mass conventional warfare in the sense that they do not do much to appeal to the supporters of either Al-Qa'idah or its affiliates. Hence it would be wrong to describe such attempts at pursuing ideological warfare as using the West's soft power.[17] In that respect, despite their stated commitment to Ronald Reagan's ideals, those supporters of the Bush Doctrine who favour such an approach have failed to study the Reagan administration's approach to information warfare.[18] For Reagan the main purpose of counter-ideology was to avoid the trench warfare approach to fighting Soviet communism. The most important purpose of Reagan's information strategy was to strike at the Soviet Union where it was weakest.[19]

Moreover, the goal of US strategy was to defeat the Soviet Union not manage risks. This is a historically important distinction in view of the danger of nuclear warfare during the Cold War. The risk-assessment-based approach to fighting asymmetric wars, however, confuses ideology and tactics with strategy. Therefore, advocates of a risk-based approach to counter-terrorism have argued that since ideologies will continue to exist and since it is impossible to root out terrorism, the only viable approach will be to minimize the risk of terrorism.[20] This approach is irrelevant since it conflates terrorism and Islamism, namely tactics and ideology, with strategy and organization.

Supporters of the traditional approach to counter-ideological warfare have repeatedly called for the export of democratic and secular values as a means of denying Al-Qa'idah the opportunity to mobilize the populations of Islamic countries.[21] Such an approach is based on two fallacious assumptions, (i) that Al-Qa'idah and other radical Islamist groups are attacking the US and Western countries because of their values, (ii) that Western secular values have universal appeal. Worse still, such a policy fails to distinguish between adversaries by conflating their ideology, policy and strategy, thereby lumping all Islamist groups together as potential adversaries of the West. A classic example of this fallacy is the work of Walid Phares. While he correctly identifies the similarities in strategy between a number of Islamist organizations for achieving victory against their governments and the West, he does not see any distinctions between the policies and strategies of various groups.[22]

Unfortunately, such misjudgements are all too common. The debate about the influence of Muhammad Sayyid Qutb on Al-Qa'idah thinking is one such example.[23] Although Qutb's ideas can be correctly said to have influenced the thinking of such Al-Qa'idah leaders as Usamah Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri, there is no evidence that either of those leaders' choice of policy and strategy was in any significant way influenced by Qutb. It takes quite a leap of imagination to argue

that Qutb's criticism of the US led Zawahiri and Bin Ladin to favour simultaneous aircraft hijackings or terrorist attacks against the US.

Such an approach will not be particularly helpful at either the operational, tactical or grand strategic levels. At the tactical level, for example, although there may be many similarities in terms of ideology, there may well be vast differences between different groups over such questions as using WMD in mass casualty attacks. Indeed such differences can be exploited to accommodate and mobilize one Islamist group against another in a balance of power approach. Ultimately, the key challenge for countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt is to balance pan-Islamists against Islamist/nationalists at the global level. If there is a global insurgency, and there is voluminous evidence that there is one, then the key challenge is to turn the adversaries' strategies inside out and to deny them the opportunity to galvanize support for their group by co-opting the Islamist/nationalists. A good example is the situation in Palestinian areas where Hamas' victory in Palestinian elections has led to a major debate over the choice of strategy in Israel and the West.

Some Israeli and American studies have identified linkages between Al-Qa'idah and Hamas, arguing that Hamas should be considered as a global terrorist threat.[24] However, Saudi Arabia's policy towards Hamas suggests that Saudi leaders have been trying to increase their own country's political influence within Hamas,[25] while indicating that they are prepared to recognize, and indeed cooperate with Israel on certain regional issues, most notably the Iranian threat. Saudi policy towards Hamas has already driven a wedge between Hamas and Al-Qa'idah. Saudi policy is also designed to deny Al-Qa'idah the opportunity to exploit the Arab-Israeli conflict to further its pan-Islamist agenda in Palestinian areas and elsewhere and to recruit members. The logical culminating point of Saudi policy would be to mobilize Hamas members as counter-guerrillas against Al-Qa'idah.[26] Needless to say, public diplomacy, information operations and counter-terrorism are important aspects of this policy, which has led Al-Qa'idah and its affiliates to challenge Hamas at the extremist end of the political spectrum. Al-Qa'idah's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has already sharply criticized Hamas for its policies.[27]

Capability-driven strategies: Ignoring politics and strategy

There is no evidence that Islamist groups lump all Western governments together either at the grand strategic or tactical levels. Al-Qa'idah's targeting policy and its declarations have repeatedly sought to draw a sharp distinction between the US and its close allies on the one hand, and Western countries which have adopted a neutral stance in the geopolitical competition on the other. For example, prior to the Madrid train bombings Al-Qa'idah adopted a policy of seeking to isolate the US in Iraq by attacking its close allies and raising the costs of being closely associated with the US. The policy was aimed at isolating the US while provoking it to either withdraw from Iraq and suffer an ignominious defeat or stay the course in Iraq and drain its resources.[28]

The same applies to the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has repeatedly sought to isolate the US by trying to negotiate with the EU on a variety of issues, ranging from the Iranian nuclear crisis to economic cooperation. Such policies are based on the assumption that there are fundamental differences over grand strategy between the US and other Western countries which can be exploited to further the agenda of anti-US Islamist groups.[29]

Little attention has been given to challenging Al-Qa'idah and similar pan-Islamist radical groups within their own frame of reference. At best, such a policy has been pursued at the tactical and operational levels in Iraq and, to some extent, in Afghanistan. Moreover, critics of the US approach to counter-insurgency in Iraq have argued that Washington has been pursuing a capability-driven strategy, thereby taking politics out of warfare and focusing on winning battles rather than wars. This approach has been criticized for being a-strategic. Some authors, such as Antulio J. Echevarria, Jeffrey Record and Colin Gray, have characterized this approach in terms of a specifically American approach to warfare.[30] Record has gone so far as to argue that the American way of war is so alien to winning counter-insurgency campaigns that perhaps it would be better for the US to refrain from engaging in counter-insurgency campaigns altogether.[31] On this view, the US approach to warfare is, among other things, a-historical, apolitical, casualty-sensitive and technology-driven. By concentrating their attention on destroying targets and capabilities, they have lost sight of the fact that even conquering territory will not necessarily guarantee success in war. As a result, having won the battle, the US has had to fight protracted counter-insurgency wars which have sapped its military capability and undermined its political, economic and strategic credibility.

Above all, according to Record, the US sees a clear dividing line between politics and warfare, thereby ignoring Clausewitz's dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means. These are all factors which make the US an unsuitable candidate for prevailing in counter-insurgency campaigns.[32] This author does not agree with Record that US officials have failed to see war as the continuation of politics. However, Record is right in pointing to the focus on capability and destruction of targets as the main driver in US strategic thinking. The author also disagrees with Record, Echevaria and Gray over their focus on strategic culture as the main source of US failure in fighting counter-insurgency campaigns. Although all these authors have provided a great deal of evidence in support of their arguments, they have not analysed counter-insurgency within the overall framework of US regional strategy and threat perceptions. Thus any analysis of US counter-insurgency campaigns must focus on overall US strategic aims, as well as on the approaches to counter-insurgency. In the case of Iraq and Southwest Asia, for example, the available evidence suggests, rather strongly, that Iranian officials believed that disputes over the choice of grand strategy had so sharply divided US officials that they could only agree on the lowest common denominator, namely focusing on tactical battlefield success.

In Iraq, as well as in the rest of the Greater Middle East region, US coercive diplomacy and counter-insurgency policies have not proceeded in tandem. Moreover, the US' capability-driven counter-insurgency campaign has facilitated the implementation of the Iranian regime's deception strategy.

In the case of Iraq, the focus on rooting out Shi'i militias in Iraq has led Muqtada al-Sadr to move into the Iranian camp. Since the implementation of the surge strategy, Sadr has been much more closely associated with the Iranian regime and even stayed in Iran to avoid a direct clash with the US.[33] However, he has been in contact with his followers who have also tried to make common cause with Sunni insurgent groups to oppose the federalization of Iraq. At the same time, Sadr's organization has been fragmented by internal rivalries and it has been reported that groups operating under the banner of the Mahdi Army have been involved in attacking Sunnis. In Baghdad, this has led Adnan al-Dulaymi, one of the most prominent Sunni political figures in the country, to accuse Shi'i militias backed by Iran of committing acts of "genocide".[34]

Iranian officials, be they reformist, conservative or radical, have seen the surge "strategy" as a battlefield tactic at best. Iranian actions suggest that they believe that the surge has not served US grand strategic interests in the Middle East, one of which was to prevent the Iranian regime from imposing its political influence on the Persian Gulf-Southwest Asia region. For regional states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Baghdad is not, has never been and will never be the central geostrategic front. The clashes between rival Shi'i groups, the paramilitary wing of the Supreme Islamic Council, the Badr Corps and the Mahdi Army, indicate that southern Iraq has already emerged as major battlefront between rival Shi'i factions.[35]

The threat matrix: Iran and regional insurgency

Iranian officials, most notably Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i and President Ahmadinezhad believe that the US is pursuing a deeply flawed strategy. The recent Iranian reaction to US arms supplies to Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia illustrates this. Some observers see the sale as based on the assumption that all of those countries faced a conventional threat from Iran and that, therefore, Washington had to demonstrate its credibility and commitment to their defence by selling arms to them. However, in Iranian radicals' calculations, regime security is the main threat facing Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Both countries are also deeply concerned about regional instability caused by the deteriorating political situation in Iraq. Iranian officials believe that the US is trying to impose comprehensive sanctions and moving towards preparing the ground for a pre-emptive strike. They believe that as part of the first policy it is building up the armed forces of Iran's neighbours, as well as those of Israel and Egypt. However, the threat is asymmetric not conventional. Therefore, Iranian radicals calculate that horizontal escalation will destabilize the very regimes that Washington is trying to prop up. As far as radical supporters of President Ahmadinezhad are concerned, the upshot of these efforts is that Washington has taken measures that will almost certainly increase the possibility of highly sophisticated weapons falling into the hands of its enemies.[36]

Indeed, this has already occurred in Iraq where Saudi Arabia has started assisting Sunni insurgents who are fighting the US-backed government. Saudi leaders believe that Washington is supporting a government which is sectarian and which is likely to endanger their fundamental interests. Saudi strategy has already caused consternation in Washington.[37] According to some observers of Middle Eastern politics, the US has sought to mollify the Saudi leadership and co-opt it by selling it arms. Another goal of US policy is to strengthen Saudi Arabia vis-a-vis Iran.[38] However, such interpretations of demonstrations of the credibility of US power ignore the fact that the primary threat to Saudi Arabia is asymmetric and regional.

Not surprisingly, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinezhad and Hezbollah General-Secretary Shaykh Hasan Nasrallah have already sharply criticized the sale of US arms to Saudi Arabia.[39] Commenting on the arms sale Ahmadinezhad declared: "We are not troubled by American weapons sales to the region. The Americans sense that their relations with countries in the area have become weaker, and they are seeking to strengthen them... The Americans seek to create divisions between our brothers in the region to impose their own will upon them... they want to present the main enemy of Arab countries (Israel) as their friend, and present Iran, the best friend of countries in the region, as their enemy".[40] Nasrallah criticized US arms sales in even sharper terms: "The United States is bringing billions of dollars worth

of arms to ignite wars in this region".[41] What is of greater significance is that Iran and Hezbollah are engaged in political warfare against Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has already begun to respond. However, Israeli support for US arms sales is likely to undermine Saudi Arabia's position in such political warfare. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olm Ert supported the deal after some Israelis expressed their concerns about the sale, arguing that US weaponry might fall into the hands of radical forces in the region.[42] Olmert's statement, if anything, will strengthen the position of President Ahmadinezhad and his allies, who have been opposing the efforts of the secretary to the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani, who is trying to negotiate a modus vivendi with Saudi Arabia across the board on such issues as Lebanon.

The evidence suggests that the Iranian regime is operating on the basis that, broadly speaking, Washington has two options, either (i) formulate a strategy for the long haul and impose comprehensive sanctions, which is a capability-driven strategy and will almost certainly accelerate the Iranian regime's nuclear weapons plans, or (ii) launch a pre-emptive strike sooner rather than later. President Ahmadinezhad and his allies believe that neither policy option will work because they are strategically flawed. Ahmadinezhad's opponents, particularly Ali Larijani and former president and current head of the Expediency Council Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, however, seem to be operating on the assumption that the US can severely damage the Iranian regime and undermine its hold on power. They do not believe that the US is capable of extricating itself from the region without incurring heavy political and economic costs. The main debate is therefore over how Iran can best asymmetrically exploit US vulnerabilities in Iraq and also over the culminating point of tactical victory. Ahmadinezhad and his allies believe that the US is so badly mired down in Iraq and Afghanistan and that it is so vulnerable to political and geostrategic pressure in Lebanon and Palestinian areas that they can threaten area-wide escalation to threaten the US with the spectre of the extirpation of its political influence in the Greater Middle East. Larijani and Rafsanjani, on the other hand, seem to be convinced that the culminating point of tactical victory has already been reached and that Iran can gain a strategic victory by starting a comprehensive dialogue with the US. They seem to believe that Iran can gain political space throughout the region through comprehensive dialogue rather than confrontation.[43]

Once again, the key issue for regional opponents of the Iranian regime is misreading the threat matrix and taking measures which are likely to accentuate the asymmetric military threat which can turn into an overwhelming political threat. The key issue here is that capability-driven strategies are likely to accentuate political threats by reducing the credibility of the very regimes and states that the US is trying to protect. The recent crisis in Pakistan provides a case in point.

President Ahmadinezhad and his political allies hope that the problems caused by the erosion of the domestic political legitimacy of US allies will then be compounded by the possibility of a pre-emptive strike against Iran. This, Ahmadinezhad and his allies seem to hope, will further destabilize the very regimes that Washington is trying to prop up. Washington is also reportedly encouraging direct talks between the Israelis and the Saudis regarding a Middle East peace process while excluding Iran and Syria.* However, Iran and Syria seem to be taking measures to increase the chances of horizontal, and possibly area-wide, escalation.

Secondly, Iranian and Syrian officials believe that Washington's policy is based on another deeply flawed assumption, namely that propping up "moderate forces" will resolve Middle Eastern conflicts. At many times in the past, periods of maximum

instability in the Middle East coincided with "peace-making" efforts. Moreover, the Iranian regime has taken advantage of the implementation of the surge strategy to carry out a strategic deception operation aimed at defeating the US at the grand strategic level. Sun Tzu has best described the importance of deception in warfare:

> *All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using force, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the adversary believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Hold our baits to entice the adversary, feign disorder, and crush him.[44]*

Deception is about exploiting the paradoxical realm of strategy for the purpose of achieving one's political goal. Grand strategy is about the use of all of a state or non-state actor's resources, political, military and economic for the purpose of achieving a political aim within the paradoxical realm. Ahmadinezhad and his radical allies believe that the surge has played straight into the hands of the Iranian regime's thinly-veiled deception operations, aimed at exploiting US vulnerabilities to establish Iran as a regional power. The first part of the Iranian strategy, its official claim that it is not interested in acquiring nuclear weapons, has been called into question because of the regime's repeated failures to disclose information about the extent and nature of its nuclear activities. The key issue is nuclear opacity and the ambiguity of Iran's extended deterrence capability because of the regime's fear that providing nuclear weapons to terrorist groups might jeopardize its own security. In such an opaque environment a premium will be placed on strategic information warfare, which is aimed at changing one's adversaries' perceptions of one's strategy. Strategic information operations, therefore, attack at the cognitive level. They also constitute the centrepiece of the strategies of all of the major regional state and non-state actors.

In strategic deception one seeks to change the adversary's perception of one's grand strategy, not just of the battlefield situation. Ultimately, the purpose of a strategic deception operation against Al-Qa'idah and other pan-Islamist groups with a similar ideology would be to persuade their supporters to re-think their commitment to their leaders and to join groups which are committed to bringing about change at home, including through resorting to violent means. Like every other strategic interaction this one is also affected by the paradoxical logic of strategy. Thus the counter-insurgency campaign pursued by Egyptian security forces might have actually radicalized Islamic Jihad and led it to form a coalition with Usamah Bin Ladin. Indeed by the late 1990s Islamic Jihad was bankrupt. Documents discovered after 9/11 indicate that Ayman al-Zawahiri spent a lot of time worrying about his group's finances. For Zawahiri the alliance with Bin Ladin was a financial necessity because Bin Ladin could guarantee the survival of his group.

Moreover, the Egyptian security forces' counter-insurgency campaign led Islamic Jihad to change its grand strategy which in turn led to a major change in the group's targeting policy. From 1998 onwards, the group focused its attention on attacking the US and other Western targets as a means of provoking the US to respond militarily. Zawahiri contended that US military retaliation would demonstrate the lack of legitimacy of US allies and increase support for Al-Qa'idah in the Islamic world. This was a milestone in the internal politics of Al-Qa'idah and other groups which were committed to waging a political jihad against their governments. The debate about the advantages or otherwise of attacking "the far enemy", as the US came to be known, has split Islamist groups, pitting various violent radical groups against one another.[45]

The pitfalls of co-optation as a strategy

If pursued as a strategy, rather than simply a short to medium term policy, accommodating nationalist-Islamist groups might have other disadvantages such as the infiltration of the armed forces and the security services by Islamists. The reason why such infiltration may occur is not difficult to fathom. Any policy aimed at splitting the ranks of Islamists requires de facto collaboration between the intelligence services and armed forces on the one hand, and the Islamist groups willing to be co-opted as part of a de facto settlement on the other. In Iran prior to the revolution, SAVAK chief Naser Moghaddam and the director of the Special Intelligence Bureau General Hoseyn Fardust pursued a policy of co-opting conservative Islamists, including those with ties to Ayatollah Khomeyni, in order to undermine the appeal of radical leftist guerrilla organizations and radical Islamists who were willing to cooperate with them. One result of pursuing this policy was that General Moghaddam turned a blind eye to the infiltration of the armed forces by Islamists prior to the revolution.[46]

If left unchecked this approach to counter-insurgency can also be self-defeating, especially if the state becomes dependent on the goodwill of potential insurgents for its survival. Moreover, members of the armed forces can be influenced by the insurgents and embrace their cause. Thus in the long run the co-optation strategy may turn out to be self-defeating and neutralize the armed forces. This is what seems to be happening in Pakistan where generations of military officers have been influenced by the political thought of Abu al al-Mawdudi.[47] Those who compare the Pakistani armed forces to their Turkish counterparts would do well to remember that the Pakistani armed forces have often acted as guarantors of "order" and stability, not of secularism.[48] In fact, Pakistani intelligence, particularly the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, ISI, has a history of close collaboration with Islamists. Recently, a former director of ISI, General Hamid Gul, called for an Islamist uprising in Pakistan.[49] General Gul's statement raises profound questions about the unity of the Pakistani military and its commitment to maintaining the existing state apparatus. Since then the situation has sharply deteriorated and President Musharraf has threatened to impose a state of emergency on the country. This caused concern in Washington, where officials have reportedly been considering the various scenarios involving Pakistan's nuclear forces.[50] Although Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reportedly dissuaded President Musharraf from imposing emergency rule on the country[51], the fact remains that instability in Pakistan will have profound implications across the region, including in the inter-Arab arena where Saudi Arabia has become increasingly dependent on Pakistan to check Iran and its allies.

The Pakistani example demonstrates the dangers inherent in embracing co-optation as a strategy rather than just a policy. As a strategy, co-optation will transform the institutions of the state, particularly those coercive instruments such as the armed forces and the intelligence services it needs to ensure its survival. Thus the logical culminating point of co-optation as a strategy is to prepare the ground for either a revolution which relies upon the neutralization of the armed forces or an Islamist coup d'état. The aforementioned scenarios are by no means mutually incompatible. A revolution could be assisted, indeed led, by elements of the armed forces acting as ring-leaders. Thus it will be, for want of a better term a revolutionary coup d'état. There is some evidence that the armed forces and security services were moving in just such a direction prior to the Iranian revolution.

Pakistan has been afflicted with the same phenomenon. Paradoxically, in the Pakistani case, the decision to pursue a co-optation strategy was motivated by the desire to play a significant role in the "war on terror" while benefiting from this role to prevent India from using its expanding nuclear relationship with the US to gain strategic advantage vis-à-vis Pakistan. Utilising classical counter-guerrilla warfare policies, President Musharraf has sought to disaggregate the insurgency afflicting Pakistan by seeking to drive a wedge between home-grown Islamists with local concerns and Al-Qa'idah and other pan-Islamists hiding in Pakistan's tribal areas. As part of this strategy Pakistan has tried to co-opt the Taliban in an attempt to gain leverage vis-à-vis the Afghan government which has been moving closer to India, possibly by threatening to overthrow the government, and to turn members of the Taleban into counter-guerrillas participating in counter-insurgency operations against Al-Qa'idah.[52] There are several problems associated with the Pakistani strategy and a full discussion of the pros and cons of this approach is beyond the scope of this paper. However, suffice it to say that the problems fall into two categories, political-cultural and strategic.

(i)   Political cultural: (a) The international community refuses to endorse counter-guerrilla operations and obtaining funding for such operations will be enormously difficult if not well-nigh impossible. Afghanistan faced a similar problem when President Karzai sought to revive militias in the counter-insurgency campaign. International donors immediately reacted by contending that they had agreed to fund the reconstruction of the country on condition that militias were uprooted. Reviving them would call into question the legitimacy of their commitment to Afghanistan. (b) President Musharraf's opponents, most notably Benazir Bhutto, as well as some of Pakistan's allies, have questioned Musharraf's motives, arguing that his declarations on the importance of waging war against terrorists are merely a veneer to disguise his own co-optation of Islamists, particularly those in the Mutahhida Majlis-I Amal, in the domestic power struggle.

(ii)   Strategic challenges: (a) In the long run, the strategic challenges posed by co-optation might be more enduring, if not more dangerous, than the political and cultural ones. At the strategic level, the decision to accommodate local Islamist groups might well accelerate the infiltration of the armed forces and intelligence services and threaten the state with the spectre of a coup d'état and possibly even a revolution. That is because in such a model the state apparatus is offering its coercive arm as a force in being to potential insurgents. In return, the insurgents agree to cease their insurgent activities in return for some cultural and political space. Ayman al-Zawahiri understood the pitfalls of co-optation as the chosen strategy of the Egyptian state when he decided to concentrate his activities on staging a coup d'état in the 1980s. When the state resorted to further co-optation of his Islamist rivals, he resorted to attacking "the far enemy" as a means of provoking the US to retaliate, thereby demonstrating the Egyptian state's dependence on the US for protection.

System structure and strategy formulation in the geopolitical competition

The formulation of strategy in the geopolitical competition in Southwest Asia is a vastly different phenomenon from what it was during the Cold War. The Cold War international system was essentially bipolar and despite the emergence of Third World radicalism, the countries which engaged in soft balancing through political

warfare could be accommodated within the framework of the international system despite their rather problematic relations with both superpowers. Two such regimes where those of Gamal Abd al-Nasser and the Iranian revolutionary regime after 1979. Both regimes had to rely on the Soviet Union during periods of sharp antagonism towards the US. However, both of them also sought to develop a host of relationships with Third World countries to increase their freedom of diplomatic manoeuvre. The issue of Iran was particularly significant because of the country's proximity to the Soviet Union. However, despite the fact that a number of Western governments, most notably West Germany, maintained relatively good relations with Iran, the dispute between Washington and its allies regarding Iran-related policy issues did not lead to major policy conflicts during the Cold War.

In the post-Cold War international system, however, policy towards the so-called rogue states has already caused major political disputes among Western countries.[53] As far as the rogue states are concerned, political warfare has emerged as the primary means of soft balancing. There does not need to be an overall change in the balance of conventional military forces for there to be major changes in the balance of political forces.[54] As Stephen Walt has argued, revolutions and revolutionary ideologies substantially accentuate the threat felt by neighbours of the revolutionary states and by some great powers.[55] It is the balance of political threats that must be the key factor in the calculation of those involved in the geopolitical competition in the region. Similar miscalculations occurred during the Vietnam conflict. US decision-makers were well aware of the Sino-Soviet split and they knew full well that the political conflict between the Soviet Union and China was affecting their relations with North Vietnam. However, the impact of the Sino-Soviet split on North Vietnam was not factored into US calculations because US strategy was not formulated on the basis of the assumption that such splits would enable the US to pursue a different strategy.[56] This was despite the fact that US officials also knew that external assistance was a factor driving forward the Vietnamese insurgency.[57] Lack of intelligence was not a problem as far as US strategy was concerned. The problem was integrating political intelligence into intelligence which was actionable at the level of grand strategy.[58] As a result, despite opposition from officials who favoured a network-centric approach, US counter-insurgency operations in Vietnam remained capability and fire-power-driven and attuned to the needs of attrition warfare. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the US fought the wrong war in Vietnam.[59]

Similar issues have arisen during the Iraq war. US officials, including President Bush, have made statements saying that US efforts in Iraq will ensure that the US homeland would not be threatened by terrorists.[60] However, according to the latest National Intelligence Estimate on the subject, Al-Qa'idah in Iraq now poses a direct threat to the US homeland.[61] Moreover, such arguments are based on the assumption that the US is fighting a conventional enemy moving conventional forces across frontiers. Nothing could be further from the truth. The enemy the US is fighting in Iraq relies on a highly committed network of ideologically sympathetic individuals who may or may not be members of the organizations the US is fighting.

Similar problems arise when one considers the recommendations of critics of Bush's strategy who have called for limiting the spill-over from the Iraq war. For example, Kenneth Pollack and Daniel Byman have argued that the US must re-deploy its forces to secure Iraq's borders and to ensure that the conflict would not spill over into other countries.[62] However, the Iraq war has already spilled over into other countries. It has influenced the insurgents in Afghanistan who have sought to copy the techniques they learned in Iraq. It has also radicalized a large number of Muslims living all over the world, including in the West.[63] More importantly, none of

the recommendations of the Pollack-Byman study focus on defeating the strategies of insurgent groups or driving a wedge between them on the basis of their ideology or strategy. Pollack and Byman have, therefore, ignored a large body of evidence indicating that insurgent groups succeed in asymmetric conflicts because of their greater determination and superior strategies. Ultimately, the Byman-Pollack analysis is deeply flawed and is symptomatic of the current obsession with so-called stability or stabilization operations. As a result strategy has been conflated with doctrine. Worse still, the case of Iraq demonstrates the degree to which doctrine and operational considerations have been allowed to define grand strategic choices.[64]

In Iran, the Bush administration's efforts to negotiate with them over the issue of stabilizing the Iraqi government has been seen as a case of US concern with policy at the expense of grand strategy. As a result, Iranian decision-makers believe that the US is increasing the chances of being defeated at the grand strategic level for the sake of stabilizing and improving the battlefield situation in Iraq. Increasingly, Iranian officials see US strategy as being defined in term of assessment, process and conflict resolution rather than in terms of achieving political aims. Given such calculations, it is not surprising that the Iranian regime has continued to pursue its nuclear programme.

Saudi strategy: Hedging or omni-balancing?

Saudi strategy is based on the assumption that the US is supporting an Iraqi government which is hostile to Saudi and Sunni Arab interests. Saudi leaders believe that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has failed to curb the activities of radical Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and they have raised their concerns with US officials.[65] At the same time, Saudi Arabia is pursuing two policies which are likely to undermine US influence in the region and are aimed at shoring up Saudi Arabia's regional position.

The first policy is to improve relations with Moscow, particularly in the energy field. President Putin's visit to Saudi Arabia was a milestone in bilateral relations.[66] The Putin visit followed a visit to Tehran by Igor Ivanov during which Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i called for Iranian-Russian cooperation in forming a gas suppliers cartel.[67]

Despite the fact that some commentators have also analysed Saudi strategy in terms of a visceral reaction to the rise of Iran as a Shi'i power, the second key issue for the Saudis remains the containment of Iranian political power across the region and the preservation of their own state in the face of Iran's emergence as a regional power. Interpretations of US and Saudi policy which emphasize US efforts to shore up the position of Sunni-majority Arab states in the face of the rise of Iran miss the point about regional strategy. One of the main reasons for Saudi Arabia's refusal to provide whole-hearted diplomatic support to the US on the issue of Iraq is the Saudi officials' opposition to Washington's support for the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. The Saudis are not as much concerned about relative power positions as the containment of the political power of Iranian radicals. In that context, they have held talks with the Iranian regime to stabilize the situation in Lebanon. They have also held talks with Iranian officials on other regional security matters. However, the increasing radicalization of Iran's domestic politics and the regime's decision to continue to pursue its nuclear programme have led the Saudis to seek to counter-balance Iran.

Nowhere is this likely to damage US interests more than in Iraq where Iran's ally Syria is also seen as a rival. Thus Saudi Arabia refused to attend a summit on Iraq attended by regional states. Moreover, the Saudis reportedly informed their Syrian interlocutors that good relations would depend upon Syria's decision to reduce its ties with Iran.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia has been broadening its ties with Russia and China in an effort to reduce its dependence on the US and other Western powers. This policy can best be analysed within the context of the Saudi leadership's efforts to stabilize its domestic situation and reduce the radical threat to Saudi stability. Thus Saudi Arabia has been pursuing a policy of omni-balancing, namely balancing in all directions. In a way, the policy is the mirror image of Iranian efforts to exploit the Iranian nuclear programme to change the Persian Gulf security system. Saudi Arabia has not been particularly vocal in terms of calling for the creation of a collective security mechanism in the Persian Gulf-Southwest Asia region. However, Saudi actions, particularly the decision to improve relations with Russia, can, over time, lead to the emergence of a different type of security regime for the region. In effect, Saudi Arabia's omni-balancing strategy, which is aimed at reducing the radical threat to the country's system of governance, can undermine US regional preponderance over time because other powers such as Russia will increase their influence in the region as part of Saudi efforts to diversify its ties.

Off-shore balancing

Opponents of maintaining a forward US military presence in the Persian Gulf-Southwest Asia region, such as Robert Pape, have argued that US military presence in Iraq is the main cause of suicide attacks and that the removal of US military presence will reduce the rate of suicide attacks and contribute to regional stability.[68] Pape's argument is flawed not least because he is proposing a grand strategic solution to a tactical problem. Al-Qa'idah and its affiliates have indicated that they intend to use Iraq as a platform for exporting their ideology to the rest of the region. Indeed this has already happened despite the coalition's military presence in Iraq. If anything, hasty withdrawal from Iraq will be interpreted as a retreat and lead to a greater number of attacks on US and Western targets across the region. The key issue is to defeat the strategy being pursued by Al-Qa'idah and its affiliates, namely that of seeking to replace the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan through terrorism and acts of violence. In effect, Pape's recommendations are based on the notion that handing Al-Qa'idah a grand strategic victory would reduce the number of suicide attacks. The same is true of the ideas of Mohammad Mohamedou, who has called for negotiations with Al-Qa'idah.[69] Such ideas again conflate strategy with tactics, thereby confusing strategy with policy and, therefore, process.

Another variation on the off-shore balancing theme calls for abandoning the idea of unipolarity and moving towards creating a multipolar international order. In their study *Ethical Realism,* Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman have argued that the US should prepare the ground for creating a multipolar international order. Within that framework, which treats Russia and China as poles of power and entails a shift from forward presence to off-shore balancing in the Persian Gulf, they have called for giving Iran a security guarantee to prevent it from weaponizing its nuclear programme.[70] A similar argument has been put forward by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt.[71] Essentially, what Lieven and Hulsman and Mearsheimer and Walt have called for is handing the Iranian regime a geopolitical victory in return for its

nuclear restraint. The Iranian regime, regardless of which faction is in power, sees the Persian Gulf as the centre of gravity of the international system and Iran's regional aspirations. Hence its call for a collective security mechanism in the Persian Gulf is as indicative of its attempt to change the regional security system as it is of its efforts to work for the creation of a multipolar international order. It is in this context that one should assess the merits or otherwise of the off-shore balancing strategy which critics of the Bush administration's policy towards the Middle East have proposed as an alternative to the current policy.

However, at present, there are two distinctly different Iranian strategic approaches to changing the balance of power in the Middle East. The radical route, favoured by President Mahmud Ahmadinezhad and his supporters, calls for a confrontation with Israel and the continuation of the Iranian nuclear programme. The evidence tends to suggest that Ahmadinezhad and his supporters have calculated that this will lead Israel to attack the Iranian nuclear programme. The only question is the context within which such an attack will occur. Thus the key issue for the Iranian president and his supporters is to limit the damage to Iranian nuclear installations caused by such an attack.[72]

The other approach, favoured primarily by the secretary to the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani, is based on the assumption that Iran can work with other powers, particularly Russia, to reduce US political, military and economic leverage on the nuclear issue. In that context Larijani and his allies also favoured a comprehensive dialogue with Saudi Arabia to stabilize the competition between the two countries and to prevent Saudi Arabia and its regional allies from responding to Iranian asymmetric activities, such as support for the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq and the Lebanese Hezbollah, at the strategic level. The key issue for Larijani and his supporters is break-out time. Any arms control measure taken by the Iranian regime is likely to increase the break-out time or reduce the country's delivery capability. The challenge for Larijani is to sell such policies to the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in the context of increasing the security of the regime. However, President Putin's statement that Russia was prepared to share the radar in Azerbaijan with the US to collect data on ballistic missile threats, including that posed by Iran, has led to a sharp deterioration of relations between Iran and Russia.[73] As a result, the Iranian regime has moved closer to embracing a policy of nuclear opacity. Significantly, Ali Larijani has made a statement on this issue, declaring that Iran had sufficient centrifuges to produce a nuclear bomb and that even if the US gave Iran a security guarantee, Iran would not cease its enrichment activities. At the same time, Larijani declared that producing one nuclear bomb would not further Iranian interests because if Iran attacked Israel with one bomb, then "America would attack us with thousands of bombs. It's suicide."[74]

US sanctions against the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps are likely to compound the regime's problems despite statements by senior Iranian officials, such as the head of the Iranian armed forces joint command headquarters, Maj-Gen Firuzabadi, that the sanctions will not affect the Guards.[75] According to some reports, the sanctions are also aimed at preventing China from trading with the Guards.[76] Since the Ahmadinezhad government has been increasingly relying upon the Guards as its protector, the imposition of sanctions will undermine the strategy favoured by Ahmadinezhad and his supporters. At the same time, Iran's deteriorating relations with Russia are unlikely to enable Larijani to sell his idea of a strategic relationship with Russia to the radicals. The struggle over the choice of strategy in Iran is also closely intertwined with Russian-Chinese relations. Iran's attempts to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are also aimed at influencing Russian and Chinese strategy.

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Asymmetric Strategies in the Middle East

What advocates of off-shore balancing do not seem to have considered is that handing Iran a strategic victory in the most critical region is unlikely to force the regime to make any concessions. After Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, Iran became bolder and continued to support Hezbollah operations against Israel. Iranian leaders interpreted Israel's move as a sign of weakness. If anything, President Ahmadinezhad's behaviour since taking office demonstrates that he is unlikely to make concessions on regional issues in the event of US concessions.

Post-Islamism?

Recently, there has been much discussion of post-Islamism. According to proponents of this thesis, such as Asef Bayat, some Islamist movements are no longer being judged in terms of their success in implementing Islamist policies. Rather, their performance is being increasingly assessed in terms of their ability to deliver on their promises regarding economic and other issues.[77] The Iranian presidential elections are a case in point. Mahmud Ahmadinezhad, one of the least well-known candidates, promised to improve the country's economic performance and help the poor. During the elections Ahmadinezhad did not say much about foreign or nuclear policy or Iran's system of government. Since coming into office, however, Ahmadinezhad has repeatedly failed to deliver on his promises. A large number of Iranian economists wrote to the Iranian president warning him that his economic policies were damaging the country. Political opposition to the government has increased steadily and even the government's conservative supporters began to call into question the president's nuclear policy, contending that Ahmadinezhad's pronouncements on the nuclear issue were damaging Iran's interests.

Given the increasing opposition to his government, Ahmadinezhad has responded by re-emphasizing the importance of Islamist ideas. His government has rounded up a large number of young Iranians, women and dissidents and accused them of engaging in "un-Islamic behaviour". Significantly, labour leaders have also emerged as major opponents of the regime. Particularly noteworthy has been the arrest and detention of the head of the bus drivers' union, Mansur Osanlu, whom the Iranian authorities have accused of engaging in anti-state activities. The opposition of labour leaders to Ahmadinezhad's government symbolizes the failure of the Iranian president's economic policies and his populist slogans.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinezhad and their allies seem to believe that given US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US is not in a position to engage in protracted military conflict with Iran. They see the use of US' soft power as the main threat facing the government. What they fear most is "a velvet revolution" similar to those which overthrew Eastern European satellites of the Soviet Union. Moreover, Ahmadinezhad's allies have also been attacking reformist and conservative centre-right politicians, such as former President Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, as un-Islamic counter-revolutionaries. The attacks on Rafsanjani have been particularly vitriolic and have called into question his loyalty to Khomeini, his commitment to defending the revolution, his attitude towards the US and his belief in Iran's system of the guardianship of the supreme jurisconsult. Rafsanjani's close ally and former nuclear negotiator, Hoseyn Musavian, was arrested and accused of spying. One of the allegations was passing on a top secret Iranian document to SIS.[78] Since then Ahmadinezhad has made public statements accusing his political opponents of committing treason when dealing with the

Iranian nuclear issue, exaggerating the US threat to the Iranian regime and encouraging "foreigners" to impose sanctions on Iran.[79]

The Ahmadinezhad government's crackdown on dissent, however, has led to a backlash which is rather similar to those which led to the emergence of the reform movement in the 1990s. For example, Grand Ayatollah Yusef Sane'i, who is close to reformist politicians, has warned that harsh measures will turn young people away from religion altogether.[80] It is highly unlikely that Ahmadinezhad will be able to unify the political system or to implement anything resembling Chinese-style reforms.[81] Given the Ahmadinezhad government's lack of religious credentials it is unlikely that the Iranian president will be able to mobilize support among the clerical establishment for draconian measures to silence his critics, most of whom have much stronger religious credentials than he or his radical allies. Thus he will be forced to increasingly rely upon his radical allies in the Intelligence Ministry and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps for political support. However, given the increasing clerical opposition to his government, that also means increasing antagonism between his radical supporters and the clerical establishment. This has wide-ranging implications for the region because Ahmadinezhad's government will be increasingly searching for a strategic victory to buttress its narrow domestic political base.[82]

The threat of protracted warfare and the strategy of challenging the adversary within its own frame of reference

As we saw above, there are pitfalls associated with all of the regional strategies and the counter-measures against them examined in this paper. The key issue is that strategy unfolds in the paradoxical realm and most of the regional actors whose behaviour this paper examined have failed to identify the culminating point of victory in their strategies. In the case of Al-Qa'idah's Iraqi branch, its systematic pursuit of sectarian warfare against Shi'is and its targeting of Sunnis who favoured entering the political process have alienated Iraqi religious and nationalist groups to the extent that even Sunni insurgent groups have begun to fight Al-Qa'idah's Iraq branch. Under the circumstances, Al-Qa'idah's Iraq branch has been trying to escalate the conflict even further by seeking to provoke a conflict with Iran. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was pursuing a similar objective prior to his assassination.[83] Former CIA and NSC official Bruce Riedel has argued that the threat of a false flag Al-Qa'idah attack should be taken very seriously.[84] The key assumption in this context seems to be that Al-Qa'idah would resort to such an attack in the belief that US neo-conservatives would be tempted to call for military action against Iran to prevent it from weaponizing its nuclear programme.

The assumption driving Al-Qa'idah's strategy seemed to be that US war with Iran would lead to a regional conflict from which Al-Qa'idah could benefit and export its brand of extremism to other countries in the region. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that President Ahmadinezhad and his radical supporters have been acting on the assumption that an Israeli and/or US attack on Iran was all but inevitable and that all Iran could do was to seek to limit the fall-out from such an attack. They embarked upon a policy of destabilizing the region in order to make it politically costly for the US to engage in protracted warfare with Iran. Therefore, some of their actions also furthered the interest of Al-Qa'idah, which was trying to cause instability to turn the entire region against the US.[85] In Afghanistan there were reports that the Iranian regime had been supplying materiel to the Taleban in an effort to ensure that the US would be over-extended. In fact, prominent Iranian radical commentators contended that Iran had an interest in

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ensuring that the US would be bogged down in Iraq. While denying that Iran had been supplying arms to the Taleban, Mohammad Kazem Anbarlu'i argued that both the US and the Taleban were Iran's enemies and, therefore, Iran had an interest in trying to balance them against each other.[86]

Given the increasingly complex threat matrix in the region, it is not surprising that governments such as those of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan should try to challenge their adversaries within their own frame of reference. However, the Iraqi government has been opposed to the idea of tacit US support for the militias fighting Al-Qa'idah lest such militias take up arms against the government and undermine its authority. Thus as far as the government is concerned, there is a tension between its commitment to counter-insurgency and its desire to maintain political control. In fact, the government's opponents have seen its decision to maintain political control as damaging to their own interests and withdrawn their support from it, thereby threatening its very survival.

Some counter-insurgency experts, such as Stephen Metz, have warned that the nature of modern insurgency is such that it makes protracted warfare rather than victory by the insurgents the main threat.[87] However, that is exactly what Al-Qa'idah in Iraq wants to achieve in its information operations. The threat to escalate the insurgency to other theatres is aimed at compelling the US to change its strategy for fear of provoking further escalation. President Ahmadinezhad and his supporters are pursuing a similar strategy vis-à-vis the US and Israel. They are trying to convince the US that any attack on Iran would lead to an area-wide escalation of the confrontation between Iran and the US and threaten the interests of all Western governments. In this way, they are hoping to convince US allies to withdraw their support from the US and threaten it with diplomatic isolation unless it changes its regional strategy.

The threat of protracted warfare, however, is likely to undercut the strategy of challenging the adversary within its own frame of reference. In Iraq, the pursuit of such a strategy requires close collaboration between the Maliki government and the Sunni militias fighting Al-Qa'idah. However, the Maliki government believes that such militias are also a threat to it. In Pakistan, the strategy has already been undermined by such actions as the occupation of the Red Mosque. The Pakistani situation is perhaps the most immediately dangerous of those examined in this paper because of the nuclear factor. Moreover, the radicalization of the Pakistani political system is taking place via two inter-related yet distinct routes, namely, Al-Qa'idah's pan-Islamist activities and increasing Talebanization. President Musharraf seemed to be operating on the assumption that although in the long run Talebanization was a much more serious threat to the stability of Pakistan, in the near term a certain degree of accommodation with pro-Taleban Islamist groups would help him fight Al-Qa'idah terrorists.[88] This would also gain him and his country credibility in the US and enable him to persuade Washington to pursue a more balanced policy towards India and Pakistan. Musharraf seems to have miscalculated on all of those counts. However, it is unlikely that his opponents' call for the democratization of Pakistan would eliminate the threat posed by Al-Qa'idah and the Taleban in the near to medium term. The increasing radicalization of Pakistan means that its nuclear forces will become a source of concern at both regional and global levels.

In terms of the regional balance of power, Pakistan has been trying to balance its relations with Iran against those with Saudi Arabia. Given the increasing polarization of Pakistani political system and the escalating geostrategic competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan itself may once again, as in the 1980s and

1990s, become an arena of competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia.[89] However, given Iran's continuing pursuit of a nuclear programme and the GCC states' interest in developing their own, this time around the Iranian-Saudi rivalry will have a nuclear dimension and questions of extended deterrence, nuclear opacity and alliance formation are likely to be at the very heart of Middle Eastern politics.

Early 21st century Eastern Question diplomacy

Graham Allison has described the Iranian nuclear crisis as the Cuban missile crisis in slow motion. However, the Iranian one is far more complex. It is a crisis in which the number of actors has been increasing and the nuclear issue is intertwined with the domestic political structures of the regional actors. In that respect, Vali Nasr's assessment that the crisis, particularly in terms of the likelihood of the outbreak of accidental war between the US and Iran, is rather like the one in 1914.[90] According to Nasr, firstly, the US decision to use force against Iran would probably escalate regional conflicts. Secondly, even if the US succeeded in effecting regime change in Iran, it would be left with a huge country which it would find much more difficult than Iraq or Afghanistan to govern.[91] However, Nasr's observation that the US should improve relations with Iran in the same way that the Nixon administration improved US relations with China misses the point entirely. In the early 1970s, China was pursuing an anti-Soviet strategy which was consistent in some areas with US strategic objectives. The Iranian regime, however, has been pursuing a strategy which is increasingly at variance with the US regional and global strategic goals.

The term "Eastern Question diplomacy" coined by L. Carl Brown to refer to the problems caused by the decline of the Ottoman empire[92] should be updated to refer to a host of problems generated as a direct result of strategic competition in the Greater Middle East. Failure to politically stabilize and modernize the polities in this region may well bring about changes similar to those which occurred in the aftermath of the Versailles settlement. However, this time around, such changes will be detrimental to Western interests.

Regardless of its economic interests or its energy dependence, the West will remain engaged in the area out of necessity, if only because the political problems of the area are such that regional states and non-state actors are likely to involve the major powers in the problems of their region in pursuit of their own individual strategies. As far as reconstruction and development are concerned, the key issue is to define a strategic framework within which economic assistance can be delivered. Therefore, provision of assistance and counter-insurgency operations must proceed in tandem. This requires close co-ordination of political and economic policies.

Insurgent groups may seek to gain legitimacy through expressing support for the establishment of law and order. A recent example is Somalia where the Islamic Courts Union sought to gain political support by calling for shari'ah law. Indeed Hasan Dahir Aweys sought to establish the Islamic Courts Union as the only alternative to the rule of warlords. In Iraq, the leader of Al-Qa'idah in Iraq, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, has sought to "Iraqify" their group in an effort to dispel the notion that it is a foreign organization seeking to destroy Iraq. The appeal to nationalist sentiment is an important tactic adopted by groups which do not recognize present state boundaries. A strategy which warlords are likely to follow in the future would be tacit collaboration with aid agencies in return for international support for their political rule.[93] Hence, ending chaos and "creating governable spaces" cannot possibly be a strategy in itself, if only because the most powerful insurgent

organization can agree to institute a crackdown on warlordism in return for international support. Sectarianism is also a potent force in the Greater Middle East. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is likely to have a global impact if only because Shi'i and Sunni Muslims live all over the world.[94]

The early 21st century version of Eastern Question diplomacy is likely to have a nuclear dimension in the sense that Middle Eastern states which are pursuing their own nuclear programmes are likely to seek to manoeuvre their allies, primarily the US, Russia and China, into a situation where they will have little choice but to provide them with security guarantees. It is likely that the great powers' refusal to do so would lead regional powers to threaten to pursue self-help strategies, including the nuclear option, to guarantee their own security. The dispute between Iran and Russia over the Bushehr reactor and the recent debate in Iran about the value of the country's 'strategic' relationship with Russia may well be the sign of things to come.[95] Larijani's statement that Iran would continue its nuclear programme even if the US gave it a security guarantee and his decision to liken the Iranian nuclear programme to "breathing"[96], suggests that Ayatollah Khamene'i has made clear that only a self-help strategy would enable the regime to ward off the perceived threat from the US.

Moreover, all the key factions involved in the power struggle in Iran see Iran's regional status as being inextricably linked to the security of the regime. The continuing political turmoil and military conflict in Iraq has led Iran to seek to assert its regional predominance to make Saudi Arabia and GCC states realign their foreign policies and to change the regional security arrangement. All these measures are broadly seen as being conducive to preserving the regime. Thus in the case of Iran not only are offensive and defensive strategies virtually indistinguishable from one another, but they are also seen as having a domestic dimension, namely the preservation of the regime.[97] On the whole, the Iranians, including the reformist factions, have had an expansive definition of Iran's national security and the regional security environment. Increasingly, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria are going through a similar process. Hence, all of those countries' domestic problems are likely to become part of the regional threat matrix. Given the increasing nuclearization of the regional security environment, this also means a closer inter-relationship between regime security and the regional nuclear balance.[98]

In such a context it would be difficult for the great powers to pursue a theatre strategy as such. Early 21st century Eastern Question diplomacy is likely to have a catalytic effect on the international system in the sense that local conflicts, which are closely intertwined with disputes over the choice of strategy, will rapidly escalate to the grand strategic level.[99] Increasingly, the regional and global escalation ladders will be closely tied to one another but they will have different dynamics in certain areas. Internally divided regional actors with fragmented political systems are likely to seek to involve great powers as force multipliers in their domestic disputes. The nightmare scenario will be what Fred Ikle has described as the threat of "annihilation from within". Ikle's concern is with the failure of political institutions to keep pace with the development of high technology; as a result a Lenin with nuclear weapons might seek to seize power.[100]

As far as the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is concerned, the international system, has been moving in the direction of a managed treaty which is increasingly based on norms and codes of conduct rather than strict observance of the letter and spirit of international law.[101] Regimes such as that of Iran have complained about "the hypocrisy" of the US and the West, arguing that they opposed the

Iranian regime because of its policies and its behaviour not because of its pursuit of a nuclear programme. However, the Iranians could hardly expect the US and the West not to pursue their own interests. In the final analysis, the main crux of the political side of the nuclear debate in Iran is over the best way of preventing the US from pursuing an all or nothing strategy. Thus Iranian strategies are increasingly aimed at compelling the US and its allies to settle for a process-driven strategy and to conflate diplomacy with strategy.

A similar tendency can be observed in President Musharraf's approach to the war against Al-Qa'idah. For Musharraf the key strategic consideration is how to take advantage of his country's alliance with the US in the war against Al-Qa'idah to improve his country's strategic position vis-à-vis India.[102] Although some observers of the regional scene have interpreted the US-Indian relationship in terms of US efforts to contain Chinese power[103], the evidence suggests that the US-Indian relationship will have much wider implications in terms of its strategic effect on Pakistan's geopolitical orientation, particularly relations with the UK as well as its internal political evolution. It is highly unlikely, moreover, that advocacy of liberalism will have much effect on the intractable conflict between two alternative Islamist visions for Pakistan. If anything, it may postpone the inevitable and force them to close ranks at least at the tactical level to oppose proponents of liberalization. More likely, the intra-Islamist conflict will continue unabated despite attempts to bring back "liberalism" because none of the actors opposing the army is powerful enough to prevail in a confrontation with either the military or Islamist groups.[104]

Outside military intervention to attack terrorist sanctuaries can be effective in the short term but it is also likely to be exploited by Islamist groups to shift the centre of gravity of Pakistani politics further in their direction. Moreover, the Pakistani military has emerged as a major economic force in Pakistani politics.[105] Any attempt to introduce economic and political reforms must take account of the interests of the military as a business class, as well as part of the coercive apparatus of the state. There is no evidence that any of the groups advocating the introduction of political reforms in Pakistan can dislodge the military. In such a situation the likeliest medium to long-term scenario will be a Pakistan polarized between the Talebanization and Al-Qa'idah routes to Islamization, with the military and civilian institutions at loggerheads. Post-Islamism is unlikely to be a force in Pakistani politics in the near term. In order to defeat Al-Qa'idah a post-Islamist Pakistani polity will probably need a de facto alliance with Islamist groups to contain and defeat Al-Qa'idah's influence. It is highly unlikely that any of the Islamist organizations in Pakistan will agree to play the role of a junior partner in such a situation.

The close interconnection between the threat environment and the strategic behaviour of America's peer competitors such as Russia and China means that they may try to exploit the US' vulnerabilities in the region to further their own geostrategic interests. The dynamics of geostrategic competition are so closely intertwined that one cannot possibly formulate one's policies only in terms of the needs of a particular region. One must prepare for global insurgency and therefore counter-insurgency.

The current global insurgency is the direct result of mass political awakening throughout the world.[106] Therefore, traditional counter-insurgency approaches are irrelevant at best and downright counter-productive at worst.[107] More often than not, regional actors have chosen to respond through horizontal escalation to US political and economic initiatives.[108] Provision of economic assistance and peace-

process diplomacy can be part and parcel of an effective grand strategy for the Greater Middle East, but they are not substitutes for it.

Defining a new grand strategy for the region requires the modernization of post-war institutions, including elite institutions and think tanks which should facilitate strategic dialogue. If there is one lesson that should have been learnt in the aftermath of 9/11, then it is the importance of state-building and defining a new source of legitimacy for state institutions in the post-conflict period. Reconstruction without state-building can, at best, only lead to transitory success.

Any effort by Middle Eastern governments and Pakistan to challenge their adversaries within their own frame of reference will undoubtedly lead Al-Qa'idah to step up its attacks on Western supporters of those governments. There is sufficient evidence indicating that Al-Qa'idah and other radical Islamist organizations consider such challenges to be the most threatening policy option that Western countries could choose. Massive conventional military retaliation, on the other hand, is considered to be the most advantageous from the perspective of core Al-Qa'idah because the group is operating on the assumption that such retaliation will radicalize the populations of the Muslim world, enhance the group's profile and over-extend the US, thereby contributing to the decline of its power. It is assumed that such over-extension will lead to the delegitimation of US power, thereby undercutting the position of America's key allies, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan in the Islamic world.[109]

Democracy is not just about voting or holding elections.[110] Some of the most un-democratic countries in the world have held elections on schedule and have had the adjective democratic incorporated into their names. Unfortunately, experience shows that the alternative to state-building is not democracy, but chaos. Hence state-building and democracy promotion are not polar opposites, but they are symbiotic phenomena which must be key components of a new grand strategy for the Greater Middle East.

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See:

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