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THE CHALLENGE OF NUCLEAR-ARMED REGIONAL ADVERSARIES

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Summary

The United States, along with other members of the international community, is striving to convince North Korea, Iran, and other states to forgo the development of nuclear weapons. If these efforts do not succeed, the consequences for U.S. and allied security could be profound.

U.S. conventional and nuclear forces will continue to have deterrent effects on the leaders of regional adversary states, such as North Korea and Iran, even if these states field substantial numbers of nuclear weapons. However, defense planners in the United States and elsewhere must begin now to confront the possibility that, in the face of superior U.S. conventional forces, adversaries of this class could see using nuclear weapons to be in their interest under a variety of circumstances during a conflict involving the United States. Several reasons exist for this:

- Regional adversary nations spend only a small fraction of what the United States does on military forces (less than 5 percent in the cases of Iran and North Korea). This virtually guarantees that any serious conflict involving the United States will end in such opponents' defeat if the conflict stays at the conventional level. (See pp. 15–17.)
- Military defeat can have disastrous consequences for authoritarian rulers, who may therefore be prepared to run high risks to stave it off. Facing the prospect of defeat, enemy leaders may perceive that using one or more nuclear weapons may be the most attrac-

tive option open to them if it might deter the United States and its allies from continuing their military operations. (See pp. 36–37.)

- In several conflicts, U.S. forces have demonstrated the capability and will to attack enemy leaders, command-and-control assets, weapons of mass destruction, and delivery means from the outset. Fears of decapitation strikes or disarming counterforce attacks could lead enemy leaders to perceive that they are in a use-or-lose situation, thus heightening the pressure to resort to nuclear use early in a conflict. (See p. 37.)

In short, deterring the use of nuclear weapons by threatening retaliation, which was a mainstay of Cold War military strategy, could be highly problematic in many plausible conflict situations involving nuclear-armed regional adversaries for the simple reason that adversary leaders may not believe that they will personally be any worse off for having used nuclear weapons than if they were to forgo their use. This being the case, U.S. and allied leaders confronting nuclear-armed adversaries will want military capabilities that offer far greater assurance than do today's that adversaries can be *prevented* (as opposed to deterred) from using nuclear weapons. This points to demands for forces that can locate, track, and destroy nuclear weapons and their delivery means before they are launched and, above all, active defenses that can destroy delivery vehicles after they have been launched. Today and for some time to come, the emphasis should be on fielding effective defenses against theater-range missiles, not ICBMs. (See pp. 39–42, 51–52.)

Unless and until highly reliable means of attack prevention become available, U.S. leaders will be compelled to temper their objectives vis-à-vis nuclear-armed regional adversaries, avoiding conflict with them or using military force in limited ways that minimize the adversary's incentives to escalate to nuclear use. (See p. 53.)