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How experts view a strike against Iran

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Abbas Milani

Simple logic shows the fallacy of the military option.

If Iran's nuclear program is peaceful, the United States will have attacked yet another Muslim country on faulty intelligence. Hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent Iranians will have been killed. The attack will strengthen the radical elements within the regime. All remnants of democracy will be eradicated.

If we assume the Iranian regime's goal is a bomb, an attack will not solve the problem. The regime needs the bomb for its own security, particularly with a disgruntled population. If Iran is attacked, the population is likely to rally around the regime, and thus the mullahs will achieve the security they hope to gain with the bomb.

Democracy is the only solution to Iran's nuclear problem, and an invasion is lethal to the cause of Iranian democracy.

Richard Andres

Two years ago, Iran declared war on the United States when it boldly began to support insurgents in Iraq. U.S. air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities would be the next escalatory step in this war of brinksmanship.

In the short term, air strikes would be more effective than media pundits generally believe. Nevertheless, the war would not stop at air strikes. Iran would almost certainly retaliate in Iraq and elsewhere. Besides this, keeping Iran from rebuilding will require impoverishing its government.

Unless Iran simply backs down after air strikes -- an unlikely scenario -- the United States would do well to target the kleptocracy's economic assets to turn indigenous power brokers against the regime. This may eventually undermine cronies' support for the war. Even if the regime continues to pursue nuclear weapons, it will not have money to do so.

We would probably win the war over nuclear weapons; however, the costs to America's economy and reputation would be significant.

Bennett Ramberg

Should the United States decide to "eliminate" Iran's nuclear program, it must occupy the country or otherwise induce regime change. Anything less will simply slow nuclear development, not halt it.

Only Germany's defeat and occupation ended the Nazi ambition. However, regime change may serve the same end as the former Soviet states and South Africa illustrate. The one exception, Libya, gave up its ambition when it feared it would suffer Iraq's fate.

By contrast, Israel's 1981 attack on Iraq's Osirak reactor delayed but did not eradicate Baghdad's ambition, as international inspectors discovered after the 1991 war. Jerusalem also benefited from Baghdad's inability to strike back. Such fears dominated the decision of the United States, the Soviet Union, India and Egypt not to use force against emerging nuclear adversaries. It continues to act as a brake in the Iranian case.

One untried diplomatic tact remains: "Nuclear probation," which would permit Tehran to acquire nuclear fuel plants subject to resident international inspectors' ability to investigate and shut any suspect site. Obstruction would initiate Security Council sanctions, including military force.

Peter Brookes

Keeping the military option in play for dealing with Iran's nuclear (weapons) program makes good policy sense. Diplomacy is always more effective when backed up by the credible threat of force.

Unfortunately, striking Iran's nuclear program isn't easy due to the number of potential targets across a country four times California's size.

Nor is it risk-free. A strike could have serious consequences, including increased energy market volatility, more Iranian meddling in Iraq/Afghanistan and even Tehran-sponsored terrorism against U.S. interests.

There are other options, too, like punitive economic sanctions. Iran, while awash in oil and gas, has economic troubles, including inflation and unemployment that sanctions would exacerbate.

But even tough sanctions may not keep the Iranian nuclear genie in its bottle -- just look at North Korea -- leaving us with no easy answers, only difficult choices.

Kori Schake

There are at least three types of attacks, varying in scope and effect, that should be considered: an attack designed to destroy as much as possible of Iran's nuclear weapons

program, an attack to delay their progress by targeting critical known elements of it, and a demonstrative strike on a symbol of the program (such as the Ministry headquarters).

Because I think Iran can be deterred from use (as opposed to possession) of the weapons, I would argue against attacking Iran unless it was making preparations to use its weapons.

It is important not to overstate the retaliatory damage Iran could do to the United States -- any military conflict will not be a single iteration. We must be careful not to deter ourselves from military or other action that is in our interests out of too much concern for their response.

The unpleasant truth is that there may come a time when attacking Iran is the right choice for American interests.

Michael Eisenstadt

Preventive military action, in the form of air and missile strikes against Iran's nuclear program, would involve major risks and uncertain prospects for success. For this reason, the United States should exhaust its diplomatic options first.

In tandem with continuing efforts to impose United Nations sanctions on Iran, Washington should engage the broadest number of countries possible to voluntarily halt financial dealings with Iran until Tehran abandons the more problematic elements of its nuclear program. At the same time, the United States should work with its allies to dissuade Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, or to deter and contain Iran should dissuasion fail.

Accurate and complete target intelligence is the sine qua non of effective preventive action, though recent WMD intelligence failures in Iraq and elsewhere raise doubts whether this condition can be fulfilled.

In the best case, Washington might set back Tehran's nuclear program several years. It should therefore plan beforehand how to best use the time gained, by preventing Iran from obtaining the materials and equipment needed to rebuild its nuclear infrastructure. And if it opts for prevention, the United States should prepare for retaliation in the form of Iranian-sponsored attacks on Coalition forces in Iraq, terrorism against U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond, and perhaps even attacks on oil exports from the Persian Gulf region.

For this reason, attacks on Iran's security services and its conventional military forces should be part of a preventive strike.

Geoffrey Kemp

A full-scale air and missile strike against Iran would significantly degrade Iran's nuclear program, but absent a parallel ground invasion, there would remain great uncertainty about the mullahs' residual nuclear capabilities. The strike would have to include attacks on Iran's military assets, particularly its air defense. This would likely kill Iranian civilians, including those who oppose the current regime. A unilateral American attack not sanctioned by the United Nations would be considered illegal under most tenets of international law. Among the repercussions would be a major spike in oil prices, an unparalleled global anti-American backlash, and an increased threat to our troops in Iraq, including a possible Shiite uprising. Most detrimental, the attack would motivate all Iranians to support eventual development of a nuclear bomb.

While no U.S. president should ever take the military option off the table, economic retaliatory measures against Iran should include coordinated U.S., European Union and Japanese sanctions against Iran's financial institutions and a ban on investment in its energy sector. Sanctions should parallel a strategy of containment and a commitment to the defense of our Arab friends and Israel, including an explicit American nuclear umbrella.

Judith Kipper

A military strike on Iran by the United States or others is not likely to destroy Iran's ambitions to have a nuclear weapon and may not even destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. Only a diplomatic solution that acknowledges Iran's legitimate security concerns is likely to deter Iran.

The global consequences of a military strike may be devastating, resulting in a clash of civilizations and an increase in extremism worldwide which will take years, if not decades, to subdue.

Stephen Zunes

A U.S. attack on Iran would lead Iranians to rally behind their government, further isolate the United States in the international community and invite Iranian retaliation. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that Iran's decentralized and partially hidden nuclear program would be destroyed, prompting the Iranians to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and reconstruct their nuclear program with a greatly intensified effort to develop weapons capability.

Iran is believed to be at least 8 to 10 years away from developing even a single atomic bomb, so there is still plenty of time for a diplomatic solution. Just as quiet negotiations proved far more successful than public threats in eliminating Libya's nascent nuclear weapons program, a similar strategy could also be effective with Iran.

If the Islamic Republic desires nuclear weapons, it is presumably for the same reason that prompted the nine current nuclear powers to develop theirs: deterrence. In return for a verifiable Iranian pledge to rule out any such nuclear ambitions, the United States should be willing to formally rule out the use of force against Iran.

In addition, rather than singling out Iran, the United States should end its opposition to a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East and South Asia and insist that all countries in that volatile region -- including Israel, India and Pakistan -- also renounce nuclear weapons.

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