

This Deal or War? Misadventures in Deterring Iran

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Sep 15, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/amwa-hdhh-alsft-aw-alhrb-mghamrat-amrykyt-fashlt-lrd-mshrw-ayran-alnwwy\)](/ar/policy-analysis/amwa-hdhh-alsft-aw-alhrb-mghamrat-amrykyt-fashlt-lrd-mshrw-ayran-alnwwy)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Without a credible conventional deterrent that goes beyond mere rhetoric, the United States cannot stop Iran from running toward the bomb.

President Obama's defense of the Iran nuclear deal rests on a simple premise: It's either this deal or war. According to the administration, not only is there no better deal to be had, but the inevitable consequence of rejecting the deal will be an eventual military conflict with Iran.

Our government's acceptance of the deal is now a foregone conclusion, but it is still worth noting that "this deal or war" is a false choice three times over. Regardless of whether one felt the deal on offer was the best choice, there were plainly alternatives to it other than war. Nor was the notion that President Obama might engage in military conflict with Iran a credible one. Despite the possibility that the deal would not materialize prior to its announcement on July 14 or that it might later face legislative defeat, no preparation for the possibility of conflict was apparent. The administration was quick to dismiss the effectiveness of the "military option" even as it insisted that it remained on the table.

Paradoxically, even had U.S. military threat been credible, the "this deal or war" formulation would still have been false; indeed, it would have disproved itself. The United States did not and does not desire a conflict with Iran, but retains the capacity to prosecute one if necessary. By contrast, the Iranian regime cannot afford a military clash with the United States. If Iranian leaders felt that the United States would respond militarily to certain nuclear advances (or other actions), they most likely would be deterred from taking those actions.

During the final phase of the nuclear talks, the United States sacrificed its leverage by forsaking deterrence. In any negotiation, each party must compare the deal on offer with the likely alternatives. By denigrating or dismissing the alternatives to a negotiated accord -- whether strengthened sanctions or military action -- Western negotiators allowed Iran to hold out for a better deal. Despite U.S. assertions that officials were ready to walk away from the

negotiating table, in reality American rhetoric suggested that we had nowhere to go.

This might all now be primarily a matter of historical interest were it not for the fact that deterrence will continue to play a vital role in enforcing or improving the nuclear accord in the coming years. States adhere to treaties not because they harbor a sense of fairness or deference to legal authority, but because they keenly appreciate their national interests. These commitments are kept out of concern for the consequences of other courses of action rather than mere fealty to the text. In this sense, treaties tend not to shape reality but codify it -- states often would take the actions pledged in a treaty even in its absence. In such cases, what treaties usefully provide is enhanced exchange of information. Rather than each side simply guessing about whether the other is taking a particular action, treaties provide a mechanism for dialogue and verification to provide greater assurance, thereby preventing misunderstandings.

Therefore, Iran must continue to believe it remains in its interest to keep its commitments as the nuclear deal is implemented. For this to be the case, the consequences of violating the deal must be serious and credible. These should include renewed sanctions, which are certainly preferable to military action if they can be made effective. But sanctions work only with the cooperation of other states, including some (like Russia or China) that are unlikely to be sympathetic to U.S. concerns regarding Iranian behavior. Even with broad international support, the pressure of sanctions may be insufficient or take effect too slowly to deter Iran in a scenario where it is determined to gain nuclear weapons.

For this reason, the United States must retain and project a credible military option in the event of Iranian violations. This will not only deter Iran, but will also provide a powerful incentive to other states to urge Iran to keep its commitments. In the event of an Iranian failure to comply with the deal, a credible U.S. military option will also help convince other states to join the United States in re-imposing sanctions, even if only to avert an American military action against Iran that would be damaging to their interests.

In the wake of the nuclear accord, exercising our military option will become more difficult for reasons outlined by Michael Eisenstadt ([see "How the Iran Deal Could Complicate U.S. Efforts to Prevent a Nuclear Breakout" \(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-iran-deal-could-complicate-u.s.-efforts-to-prevent-a-nuclear-breako>\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-iran-deal-could-complicate-u.s.-efforts-to-prevent-a-nuclear-breako)). Iran's nuclear activities will not only be "legitimized" by the accord, but will also benefit from international assistance. The international coalition built by the United States to pressure Iran will have dispersed and would need to be rebuilt amid heavy commercial and diplomatic re-engagement with Iran by our allies and others. Yet such a coalition would be vital to the success of any military effort, should one be necessary, and building one will likely require convincing evidence that Iran has abrogated its commitments, lest the United States be seen as simply disregarding our own. For its part, Iran is likely to harden its facilities and improve its defensive and anti-access/area denial capabilities, rather than seeking to match the United States and its regional allies in conventional terms -- a futile effort.

However, the military option cannot be merely rhetorical, buttressed only by the rote utterances of U.S. officials. Instead, our military planning will need to be more flexible and responsive to Iranian countermeasures, and we will need to have options ready short of full-scale war to respond to Iranian violations of its nuclear commitments or other provocations. For example, better options are needed to disrupt and counter Iranian support for proxy groups, to respond to Iranian threats against shipping in the Strait of Hormuz witnessed in recent months, and to counter the threat posed by Iranian missiles. Allies should be integrated into such efforts, not to absolve the United States of responsibility, but to revive our regional partnerships, bolster allies' security, and add to our own capacity.

Further developing these options would provide the president with flexible tools to deter and counter Iran. More importantly, preparing these tools would serve to signal the seriousness of our intent and shape the calculations of both Iran and other states to avert the very exigencies they are designed to counter.

Michael Singh is the managing director and Lane-Swig Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute. From 2005 to 2008, he worked on Middle East issues at the National Security Council. ❖

War on the Rocks

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,

Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)