

Strategic (Mis)communication on Iran

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Privately discussing U.S. concerns about military action against Iran is both responsible and necessary. Musing upon them publicly, however, is a strategic error.

Given the alarms that have increasingly been sounded in recent months about Iran's nuclear progress and furor over its alleged plotting to kill the Saudi ambassador in Washington and the storming of the British embassy in Tehran, one might think that Iran's leaders would be worried about the prospect of a Western attack on their country. However, their remarks suggest just the opposite. In recent days, Iranian Leader Ali Khamenei has boasted of "shatter(ing) the resolve" of the West, and the commander of Iran's paramilitary Basij forces -- who were responsible for the embassy rampage -- predicted that the U.S. would be too weak even to respond to an Iranian attack.

Perhaps this is just bluster; however, U.S. officials have done little to dampen the regime's overweening self-confidence and the proclivity for escalation which is fueled by it. While Obama administration officials continue to assert that the military option remains "on the table" with respect to Iran, they have a counterproductive tendency to simultaneously undermine those assertions and thereby undermine our efforts to deter Iran and muster support for tougher sanctions. The latest disquisition on the inadvisability of military action came from Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who on Friday described five reasons why the U.S. should not strike Iran. All of them were debatable.

First, Panetta claimed that an attack might only set back the regime "one, possibly two years" because "some of [the nuclear] targets are very difficult to get at." Putting aside the advisability of broadcasting the limits of our military capabilities to Iran and others, this analysis is questionable. Presumably Panetta is in a position to know whether it would actually be difficult to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, though recent unexplained explosions such as the one which nearly obliterated an Iranian missile complex suggest they are vulnerable. In any case, even partial damage could be difficult for Iran to recover from quickly. Centrifuge manufacturing, for example, depends critically on specialized, hard-to-acquire components, which would make reconstituting the program difficult with vigorous

sanctions enforcement.

Second, Panetta asserted that an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would result in increased support for the regime in Iran and the region. However, it is far more likely that our Arab allies -- especially those in the Gulf, who see Iran as the chief threat to their security -- would at least privately cheer a successful attack. Among Muslim-majority populations, a mid-2010 Pew poll found that only in Pakistan is there majority support for Iran's nuclear program. In Iran itself, far from bolstering the regime an attack may undermine it. Khamenei himself recognized this recently, warning in a speech to the Iranian navy that two previous Iranian regimes -- the Qajars and Pahlavis -- had shown vulnerability in the face of foreign powers and had been swept aside as a result.

Panetta's third, fourth, and fifth assertions all concerned Iranian retaliation -- that Iran would target U.S. ships and bases; that an attack would carry economic consequences, presumably because Iran would target oil shipping or seek to close the Strait of Hormuz; and that an attack would lead to Iranian escalation and a conflict that would "consume the Middle East."

It is a risk of any military activity that one's adversary will retaliate; the question is how capable he is of doing so. While the threat posed by Iran and the uncertainties inherent to any conflict should not be discounted, neither should they be exaggerated. Much sober analysis and planning would go into any strike on Iran by the United States and its allies, and it is difficult to imagine that the conclusion of those deliberations would be that we would be incapable of dealing with Iranian retaliation. Most open-source assessments of the Iranian threat to shipping in the Persian Gulf, for example, conclude that Iran could not close the Straits for more than a brief period in the face of U.S. resistance.

As for escalation -- it is already happening, as demonstrated by the aforementioned assassination plot and the storming of the British embassy. Suggesting that we are deterred from responding is to invite further provocation. Conversely, if we wish to prevent further escalation or, in the aftermath of a strike, make Iranian leaders think twice about how they respond, we must make clear that we are willing and able to counter any Iranian outrage or retaliation.

For U.S. officials to consider privately the concerns raised by Secretary Panetta is both responsible and necessary. To muse upon them publicly, however, is neither; it is a strategic error. Undercutting the credibility of the military threat not only reassures Tehran, but it increases the temptation of our allies in the region to hedge their bets and takes pressure off of states such as Russia and China to support sanctions targeting Iran's central bank and oil revenues. Panetta to his credit did not rule out force, but said it should be a last resort. Few would disagree, but the timing may not be up to us -- the Iranian regime is unlikely to extend us the courtesy of waiting until we have exhausted all sanctions and diplomacy before going nuclear. The surest way to put off that date and buy breathing room for a diplomatic strategy is to convince Iran's leaders that while we are not eager for a conflict, we are prepared to fight and win one if necessary.

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