

Here's Why the US Might Not Attack Iran

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By the spring of 1951, the United States military and its allies were in a difficult situation on the Korean Peninsula. Having pushed North Korea's army all the way to the Yalu River in 1950, Chinese military units crossed the border and mounted a ferocious counteroffensive, driving the Americans back almost to the lines that existed when the Korean war had started two years earlier.

For his part, the American commander, General Douglas MacArthur, railed against the failure of politicians in Washington to extend the fight to the Chinese in Manchuria, using nuclear weapons if necessary. And one might have expected the US military establishment -- its soldiers and Marines locked in mortal combat with the Chinese in Korea -- to have matched MacArthur's belligerence.

Instead, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Omar Bradley, actively resisted war with China, telling Congress, "this strategy would involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy." MacArthur, who had been relieved a month earlier, returned to the US, and President Harry Truman wisely limited the war to Korea.

Today, with American soldiers and Marines dying in Iraq from Iranian explosives and at the hands of Iranian-backed militias, voices in Washington are calling for military confrontation with Iran. It's not just in Washington, either: In Israel, Lebanon and among the Gulf states, some officials are similarly pressing for the use of American military force against Iran because such action might serve their own purposes. None of those voices, however, consider how the US military, as an institution, might resist moves that could lead to such action.

For example, Admiral William Fallon, the new commander of US Central Command, has rejected calls for a third carrier group to be sent to the Gulf as a message to the Iranians. War against Iran, he has said, "will not happen on my watch."

Leaving aside the relative merits of a strike against the Iranians, why might America's military resist such action? First, consider the fact that the US has at the moment 162,000 troops in Iraq, 30,000 in Kuwait, 4,500 in Bahrain and 3,300 in Qatar -- not to mention the two carrier battle groups in the Gulf or the 8,500 troops on the ground in Afghanistan. In the event of an American or Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, for example, the troops in Iraq, the Gulf and Afghanistan would be in even greater danger than they already are, vulnerable to an Iranian counterattack or, more likely, an Iranian-sponsored terror campaign.

Second, there exists a tremendous sense of guilt among the US senior officer corps for what is seen as a failure to stand up to the civilian leadership in the rush to go to war against Iraq in 2002 and 2003. Much of the current divide

between America's generals and its junior officer corps boils down to a sense on the part of junior officers that their superiors largely acquiesced to whatever Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said in the run-up to the Iraq war. The charge of spinelessness is one that hurts America's generals, especially as it comes from lieutenants and captains who have proven themselves on the battlefield of Iraq.

Third, in the wake of the Iraq war, professional military officers are more suspicious than ever of think-tank types with theories on how easy military victories can be achieved. As an active-duty US Army officer recently told me: "If I hear one more lawyer with no military experience explain to me how air power alone really can do it this time, I'm going to kill him."

But how exactly would, or could, the US military resist a decision of civilian policy-makers? In the American constitutional system, the uniformed military is placed under civilian control and subject to the decisions made by elected politicians and their appointees.

But that doesn't take into consideration that the Defense Department is the largest and most complicated department in the US government. As a bureaucracy, the Pentagon is almost Ottoman in terms of its scale and complexity. The system is dependent on thousands of mid-level military officers and civilian bureaucrats, and if a few determined bureaucrats set their minds to slowing a march to war, they can do it. The employees of the Pentagon can insist that every form be filled out in triplicate, that every authorization be approved by Congress, and bury those agitating for war in so much paperwork it would take a determined effort just to dig out.

The second thing those military officers and bureaucrats could do is leak information to the press should the administration begin taking secret steps toward military action. Prior to the Iraq war, officers rarely came into contact with journalists. But thanks to the personal relationships that have developed between journalists and the military in Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly every mid-level US Army or Marine Corps officer has the name and number of at least one journalist in his or her rolodex.

Finally, it is not inconceivable that serving military officers would resign rather than sanction another poorly planned military adventure in the Middle East. High-profile resignations, along with leaks to the press, would only feed already strong domestic opposition to a war with Iran.

In the end, it is still possible that the US military might assent to going to war against Iran. US Air Force Major General Charles Dunlap -- a respected strategist -- has publicly advocated bombing Iran in order to win in Iraq, and Air Force officers in general are far more enthusiastic about the potential of air power than Army and Marine Corps officers.

But the important thing is that those wishing to convince the US to take military action against Iran must first convince the military. In light of American troop deployments in and around the Gulf and the continued difficulties in Iraq, that's going to be a tough sell.

Andrew Exum, a Sorel fellow at the Washington Institute for Near Policy, led a platoon of US Army Rangers in Iraq in 2003. He wrote this commentary for the Daily Star. ❖

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