Halting Iran’s Nuclear Programme: The Military Option

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Conventional wisdom says preventive action against Iran’s nuclear programme would entail significant risks and uncertain prospects of success. But that wisdom focuses too narrowly on military-technical considerations, does not ask the right questions regarding the preconditions for successful prevention, ignores historical experience and fails to adequately consider the risks associated with the alternative: deterrence.

The measure of success for a policy of prevention would be whether it leads to a decision by Tehran to halt at least those elements of its nuclear programme, such as enrichment or reprocessing, that could contribute to development of nuclear weapons. Thus, while preventive action should aim to maximise damage to Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, it should be done so as to pave the way for multilateral post-strike diplomacy to pressure Iran not to rebuild, or for subsequent military strikes if Iran were to do so.

Military action that succeeded in destroying key nodes in Iran’s nuclear infrastructure would risk failure if it led to widespread condemnation of Washington, emboldened Tehran to rebuild, loosened international constraints on Iran’s nuclear programme by making Iran a ‘victim’, and deterred the United States from undertaking further action against Iran’s nuclear pro-

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gramme. Conversely, military action that, regardless of damage inflicted, convinced Tehran not to rebuild would have to be deemed a success.

With lingering bitterness over the invasion of Iraq still colouring attitudes in the United States and Europe toward the use of force, and with new tensions between Russia and the West over the former’s invasion of Georgia, it seems unlikely that the United States could now carry out a strike that would lay the groundwork for effective multilateral post-strike diplomacy or subsequent military action. This might change, however, with a different US administration or a different international context. Context matters: the international response could depend on whether prevention is seen as a justifiable response to perceived provocations and threats or as an illegitimate act not grounded in international law. And the popular response in Iran could depend on whether prevention is seen by most Iranians as an unjustified act of aggression, or as a response to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s provocative statements and policies. If Iranian hardliners are seen as the source of the problem, then many – in the United States, Europe, the Gulf Arab states, and elsewhere – might reluctantly accept preventive action as an unfortunate necessity. This perception could also influence an Iranian decision to rebuild, and how it might respond militarily.

The way that prevention is perceived would also depend on whether Washington was respected for its judgement and commitment to multilateral diplomacy. A further question would be the immediacy of the threat – whether diplomatic avenues seem to have been exhausted, Iran is believed to be close to having a nuclear weapon, and the option of living with a nuclear-armed Iran is deemed unacceptable by many countries.

Although many influential states, including the P5+1, have grown impatient with Iran’s stonewalling of the UN over its nuclear programme, and alarmed at the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, many also, for now, rule out prevention as an appropriate response. This could change, however, if Iran were to continue to defy the UN, threaten Israel and bully its neighbours.

A number of military-technical considerations would play a critical role in any decision to undertake preventive action. Detailed, accurate target intelligence regarding Iran’s overt nuclear programme, and its relationship
to any clandestine nuclear-weapons programme that may exist, is a *sine qua non* for success. Moreover, part of Iran’s overt nuclear infrastructure is located in buried, hardened facilities. The ability to damage or destroy such facilities depends, among other factors, on their depth underground, the composition or geology of the overburden, hardening measures taken to protect them, and the characteristics and capabilities of available penetrator munitions and delivery platforms.

The timing of an operation would depend on whether the intelligence picture is improving or deteriorating, whether key nodes in Iran’s nuclear infrastructure are at a more or less advanced stage of development, and whether political considerations, such as the November 2008 US or May 2009 Iranian presidential elections, militate for earlier or later action.

Without accurate, detailed target intelligence and the ability to inflict significant damage on key nodes of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, there is no point in bombing. There are tremendous uncertainties surrounding these various issues; none can be answered definitively with publicly available information. Moreover, because different components of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure may be at different stages of development, and because Iran may try to rebuild, a successful policy of prevention could require successive strikes against a number of targets, in conjunction with sustained diplomatic efforts to pressure Iran not to rebuild.

**Prospects for Iranian retaliation**

Tehran’s track record of responding to military provocations or attacks is decidedly mixed, and has been greatly influenced by contextual factors.

- After an Iranian mine damaged a US destroyer in the Gulf in April 1988, the United States sank two Iranian oil platforms. Iranian naval forces responded by attacking several US ships, resulting in the sinking of most of Iran’s remaining large surface combatants by the US Navy. Iranian attacks on shipping fell off sharply thereafter.
- In July 1988, the USS *Vincennes* accidentally shot down an IranAir Airbus, killing all 290 passengers aboard. Tehran, believing the shoot-down was intentional and that the United States had entered
the Iran–Iraq war alongside Baghdad, concluded a ceasefire with Iraq. Iran apparently never retaliated for the shoot-down.

- In August 1998, after Taliban fighters overran the Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif, they massacred several thousand Shia Hazaras, and 11 Iranian diplomats. Iran responded by deploying 200,000 troops along its border with Afghanistan, but did not attack, apparently to avoid being drawn into an Afghan quagmire. Instead, it joined Russia in rushing more arms to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, facilitating a successful counteroffensive.

These and other experiences suggest that Tehran recognises that at times its interests are best served by restraint, even when nationalist passions are inflamed. At other times, Iran has delivered sharp, immediate responses, though these have not always been particularly well conceived or well timed.

Should Tehran decide to respond to a preventive strike, it has a wide range of options, though its ability to implement them may be constrained. Iran could disrupt the flow of oil from the region by trying to close the Strait of Hormuz. This would, however, harm Iran at least as much as its adversaries. Tehran presently has no other way to bring its oil to market; nearly all its oil and gas exports pass through the strait. Attempting to close the strait would also invite reprisals against Iran’s oil-production infrastructure, while politically isolating Tehran. Iran could attack critical infrastructure in the Gulf, such as oil-processing facilities or water-desalination plants, and it seems confident that its small-boat swarming tactics could inflict painful losses on the US 5th Fleet in the Gulf. Iran could proclaim a propaganda victory by bloodying the US Navy. However, proper planning and preparation could mitigate the impact of Iranian attacks on critical facilities and reduce the likelihood of successful swarming tactics. Moreover, Iran is vulnerable to attacks on its own critical infrastructure.

Iran has not, so far, provided insurgent and terrorist groups in Iraq and Afghanistan with which it is aligned with the most advanced weapons in
its inventory, but it could do so in the wake of a strike, increasing the risk for US forces. Beyond attacks on US forces, however, it is not clear that it is in Iran’s interest to further destabilise Iraq or Afghanistan. Iran might urge Hizbullah to launch rocket attacks against Israel in response to a US strike, harming a key US ally and scoring points on the Arab street. However, Hizbullah, recovering from its summer 2006 war with Israel, might be reluctant to jeopardise its base of support in the Shia community, reconstruction efforts in southern Lebanon, and its efforts to rebuild its military forces. Iran might also launch a missile strike on the Israeli nuclear reactor at Dimona, though its missiles may not be sufficiently accurate to hit the target.

Iran’s capacity to launch a protracted terrorist war of attrition spanning several continents remains one of its most potent levers in the event of a confrontation with the United States. While such a response would dramatically broaden and intensify the US ‘war on terrorism’ at a time US forces are stretched thin in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, it would also risk further isolating Iran politically.

Problems with deterrence
If the risks and challenges of prevention are unpalatable and daunting, the risks and challenges of deterrence are even more so. Deterrence defers a crisis, but runs significant long-term risks. Some are incremental, such as more active Iranian support for terrorism, a resumption of efforts to export the revolution under the protection afforded by Iran’s nuclear umbrella, or a more assertive foreign policy, increasing the risk of conflict with its neighbours or the United States through miscalculation or recklessness. The most worrisome involves the possibility of a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

Deterring a nuclear-armed Iran is likely to prove much more difficult than deterring the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. The international community is not likely to have the political will to build and maintain a broad coalition of states to deter a nuclear Iran over a period of decades. Regime factionalism, which has produced dramatic policy zig-zags in the past, could complicate efforts to establish a stable deterrent relationship with Iran, and could create potential command-and-control problems; the same
radical institution (the Revolutionary Guard) that funds, trains and supports terrorists also controls Iran’s ‘special weapons’ (missiles and weapons of mass destruction) programmes, raising the risk of nuclear terrorism. And some radical regime elements are not particularly well informed about the outside world, believe that God is on their side, and might welcome confrontation as a means of reviving the spirit and values of the Islamic Revolution or of hastening the reappearance of the Mahdi – the Shia messiah.

Pursuing a policy of deterrence runs the risk that an Iranian nuclear-weapons programme could spur additional proliferation. Tehran has stated it will share its nuclear technology with other Muslim states, raising the possibility that Iran’s programme will spawn others. And should Iran get the bomb, a number of other states in the region (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) or elsewhere (Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan and Japan) may be tempted to do so as well, undermining global norms against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, complicating the challenge of deterrence in a proliferated world, and increasing the eventual likelihood of a nuclear war.

Finally, the possible acquisition of nuclear weapons by a volatile country like Iran raises questions about the long-term security of its nuclear stockpile. While Pakistan appeared relatively stable in the mid 1980s when Washington turned a blind eye to its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons to ensure Islamabad’s support for the Afghan mujahadeen, today, US policymakers worry about the impact of political instability on the security of Pakistan’s nuclear stockpile. Over time, Iran could likewise face domestic instability due to unrest among its disaffected youth or minorities. For proliferation not to end in tragedy, a nuclear-weapons state must have responsible leaders and stable institutions of governance and control ever after. Iran provides ample cause for concern.

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Diplomacy offers the preferred solution to the ongoing standoff over Iran’s nuclear programme; if pursued with a degree of urgency and seriousness, it might yet offer a modest prospect of success. But because it is by no means clear that the international community will muster the collective willpower
necessary to resolve this problem diplomatically, the United States and its allies need to systematically assess the risks, challenges and potential consequences of the principal alternative policy options for dealing with Iran: preventive action and deterrence.

For prevention to succeed, it cannot be a one-off affair, but needs to be a sustainable policy. Force is much more likely to be effective if its legitimacy is widely acknowledged by the American people, key US allies, the international community, and even important political currents inside Iran. These key publics must believe that the Islamic Republic is refusing reasonable diplomatic proposals, that no good prospects exist for stopping Iran’s nuclear programme short of military force, and that a nuclear Iran is an unacceptable threat to the peoples of Iran and the region, the global non-proliferation regime, and international peace and stability.

Preventive action is more likely to be successful if done in a way that sets the conditions for post-strike diplomacy to pressure Iran not to rebuild its nuclear programme, or additional strikes to prevent it from doing so. Fulfilling these desiderata may prove difficult under current conditions, though fulfilling the requirements for a policy of deterrence vis-à-vis an increasingly assertive Iran may prove even more so. Precisely because the alternatives – prevention and deterrence – are so risky, the international community should redouble efforts invested in diplomacy. But the United States and its allies should also further strengthen the credibility of the military option to bolster the prospects for successful diplomacy while laying the groundwork for preventive military action, should it become necessary.