Changing Iran’s Cost-Benefit Analysis of Its Nuclear Program

By Thomas J. Buonomo
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U.S. diplomats have yet to build sufficient international support for sanctions that are constricting enough to dissuade Iran from continuing with its uranium enrichment efforts and obstruction of IAEA inspections. If Iran continues on its current course and China cannot be brought on board to a more constricting sanctions regime, U.S. or Israeli leaders might eventually feel that they are left with no choice but to attempt a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities or perhaps even pursue regime change by covert or overt means.

Such a course of action would have the potential to lead to significant U.S. naval casualties in the Persian Gulf as well as Iranian retaliation against U.S. military and civilian personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq. And while the introduction of U.S. conventional ground forces into Iran might be seen as an improbable scenario, it is impossible to predict how Iranian officials would respond to U.S. or Israeli airstrikes, particularly if they believed that such strikes were ultimately intended to help catalyze regime change.

Military action is not a predetermined outcome however. There is still time and space to bring China on board and ultimately to dissuade Iran from its current course. Doing so, however, will require a willingness on the part of U.S. officials to offer Iran a broader array of political and economic incentives than they have so far presented. If accepted, these incentives would offer a way out of the current diplomatic impasse. Alternatively, they would add weight to allegations of Iran’s ultimately untrustworthy intentions.

Iran’s Nuclear Program: A Question of Motives

Iran has four plausible reasons for pursuing a nuclear program. The first is to transition to an alternative source of electricity for domestic consumption. This would purportedly free up oil and natural gas reserves for export at a higher price on the global market rather than remaining allocated to Iran’s highly subsidized domestic market, requiring enrichment to a level of 3%.

The second, according to Iranian officials, is to produce medical isotopes for treatment of Iranian cancer patients, requiring enrichment to 20% - the level Iran has attained and at which it currently appears to have limited its enrichment efforts.

The third would be to develop nuclear weapons or a breakout capability in order to deter foreign powers that it fears are covetous of its energy resources, which would require enrichment to 90%.

The fourth would be to brandish nuclear weapons as insurance against regime change while pursuing regional hegemony through the use of political and economic coercion, proxy forces and covert warfare.
The U.S. intelligence community, Mossad, and the IAEA are in consensus that while Iran has taken steps to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, it has not yet made the final decision to produce the weapons themselves.

Nevertheless, the disconcertingly short time it would take Iran to enrich from its current level to weapons grade, as well as the possibility that the intelligence community could fail to detect higher levels of enrichment at secret sites, has provoked some national security analysts to advocate for preventive military action.

Others policy analysts, however, continue to argue for rapprochement, diplomacy, sanctions, covert actions, containment, or a combination thereof in the hopes of dissuading Iran’s leaders from taking the final step, mitigating the consequences if they do, or overthrowing them by means short of military conflict.

The Iran Policy Spectrum: Military Action

Matthew Kroenig, Special Advisor in the Office of the Secretary of Defense on U.S. defense strategy and Iran policy from July 2010-2011, argued in favor of military action in the March/April edition of Foreign Affairs,

“Tehran would certainly feel like it needed to respond to a U.S. attack, in order to reestablish deterrence and save face domestically. But it would also likely seek to calibrate its actions to avoid starting a conflict that could lead to the destruction of its military or the regime itself. In all likelihood, the Iranian leadership would resort to its worst forms of retaliation, such as closing the Strait of Hormuz or launching missiles at southern Europe, only if it felt that its very existence was threatened. A targeted U.S. operation need not threaten Tehran in such a fundamental way.

To make sure it doesn’t and to reassure the Iranian regime, the United States could first make clear that it is interested only in destroying Iran’s nuclear program, not in overthrowing the government.”

While not categorically opposed to military action against Iran, Colin Kahl, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East from 2009-2011, admonished in a direct rebuttal supported by former CIA Director Michael Hayden,

“Assuming the worst about Washington's intentions, Tehran is likely to overreact to even a surgical strike against its nuclear facilities….

Controlling escalation would be no easier on the U.S. side…. Proxy attacks against U.S. civilian personnel in Lebanon or Iraq, the transfer of lethal rocket and portable air defense systems to Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, or missile strikes against U.S. facilities in the Gulf could cause significant U.S. casualties, creating irresistible political pressure in Washington to respond.

If Iran did attempt to restart its nuclear program after an attack, it would be much more difficult for the United States to stop it. An assault would lead Iran to distance itself from the IAEA and perhaps to pull out of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty altogether. Without inspectors on the ground, the international community would struggle to track or slow Tehran's efforts to rebuild its
Concurring with Kahl while differing in their conclusions, Jamie Fly, Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Initiative, and Gary Schmitt, Director of Advanced Strategic Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, contended:

“A limited military strike would only be a temporary fix, and it could actually do the opposite of what it intends -- drive the program further underground and allow Iran to retain the ability to threaten the United States and its allies.

If the United States seriously considers military action, it would be better to plan an operation that not only strikes the nuclear program but aims to destabilize the regime, potentially resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis once and for all…”

Whether a limited military strike or regime destabilization operation, Iran's leaders would almost certainly believe they would have to respond forcefully to such a challenge to maintain their credibility in the region, employing missiles, proxies, and their own terrorist operatives.”

While it is impossible to precisely predict how Iran’s leaders would respond, what is certain is that a military strike by Israel or the United States would increase the potential for a much bloodier and costlier conflict than U.S. military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan if it expanded into protracted asymmetric naval or ground war within any of those territories. And just as Iraq and Afghanistan’s neighbors have provided covert support to insurgents, it is conceivable that Russia and China might do the same in response to a U.S. attempt at Iranian regime change, particularly if it involved the use of a large number of ground forces.

Fomenting Regime Change

Meir Dağan, former chief of Israel’s foreign intelligence agency Mossad and a clear-eyed opponent of preventive Israeli military strikes on Iran, recently expressed his support for regime change by supporting Iran’s internal opposition. Covert efforts at regime change would reduce the probability of regional conflict; however, they would still carry substantial risk of Iranian retaliation leading to war if the Iranian government discovered foreign hands behind its internal opposition. Sabotage attempts and assassinations targeting Iranian nuclear scientists, while certainly provocative, do not reach the same risk threshold as covert operations aimed at the overthrow of the Iranian government itself.

Sanctions

While the Obama administration hopes that sanctions against Iran will bring it sincerely to the negotiating table, the Guardian reported on 17 February,

“There is a strong current of opinion within the administration – including in the Pentagon and the state department – that believes sanctions are doomed to fail, and that their principal use now is in delaying Israeli military action, as well as reassuring Europe that an attack will only come after other means have been tested.”
Though more time may be required for the latest round of sanctions to take full effect, China's refusal to participate makes it likely that Iran will weather them.

**Containment and Deterrence**

Fareed Zakaria, host of CNN’s international affairs program and Editor At Large of *TIME*, argued in the Washington Post on 14 March,

> “It would be better for Israel, the Middle East and the world if Tehran does not acquire [nuclear] weapons. The U.S. effort, in collaboration with almost the entire international community, to prevent this from happening and to put tremendous pressure on Tehran, is the right policy. But were Tehran to persist, were its regime to accept the global isolation and crippling costs that would come from its decision, a robust policy of containment and deterrence would work toward Iran as it did against Stalin’s Soviet Union, Mao’s China, Kim Jong Il’s North Korea and the Pakistani military.”

Considering the Cuban Missile Crisis, Islamist terrorist attacks in India and the Pakistani ISI’s support for militant Islamist groups in Afghanistan, however, a policy of containment and deterrence toward an arch-rival of Iraq and Saudi Arabia could take dangerous and unexpected turns down the road.

**Diplomacy Without Sanctions**

*Trita Parsi*, President of the National Iranian American Council, asserted in *The Daily Beast* on 23 March that “sanctions make war more likely” in an op-ed under the same title. Citing the case of pre-2003 U.S.-Iraq relations in particular, he argued that sanctions create a dynamic between countries in which “they quickly get trapped in an escalatory cycle…creating an irreversibility that eliminates all non-confrontational options.”

There was and is nothing inevitable or deterministic about this however. Dr. Parsi leaves out of the equation Saddam Hussein’s deception efforts, motivated in part by his self-professed fears of appearing weak before Iran, as well as the Bush administration’s impatience with the U.N. weapons inspection process, motivated in part by their post-September 11th fears and their own arrogance.

It could just as easily be argued that diplomacy without sanctions would demonstrate a lack of resolve within the international community regarding Iran’s obstruction of IAEA inspections, emboldening them to accelerate the development of a nuclear weapons capability. ??

**Rapprochement**

Flyntt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, National Security Council Senior Director for Middle East Affairs and Director for Iran under President George W. Bush’s first administration, respectively, maintain that “we are not going to be able to sanction [Iran], browbeat them, or even bomb them into surrender. We need to be able to come to terms with them.”

While it would be ideal to achieve rapprochement with Iran, two minimal prerequisites to negotiations should be Iran’s full compliance with IAEA inspections and strict limitations on its enrichment activities, neither of which the Leveretts support.

**A Middle Way: Incentives-Based Diplomacy and Deciphering Iranian Intentions**

Considering the current doubtful prospect of a decisive sanctions regime and the unpredictable consequences
of a military strike or covert action against the Iranian government (past military estimates do not give cause for confidence) the Obama administration should test Iranian leaders’ intentions by offering them an opportunity for rapprochement in the form of renewable energy technology and financial incentives to help them achieve their ostensible economic objectives.

Iran has abundant geothermal, solar, hydroelectric and wind energy resources that could help it satisfy its domestic electricity demand without presenting an inherent threat or monitoring nightmare to the international community. This would require substantial investment but Iranian leaders might be prepared to consider such an alternative if the U.S. and other U.N. Security Council states were prepared to offer it attractive financing options.

Such an initiative would demonstrate to Iran that the United States is not an implacable enemy but rather is willing to take meaningful steps to support its peaceful aspirations and integration into the international community in return for reciprocal security assurances. If Iranian leaders no longer perceive a foreign threat, whatever defensive motivation they might have for pursuing a nuclear weapons capability would lose momentum. Advocates for a more offensive Iranian foreign policy would in turn face pressure from moderates not to spurn an opportunity for peace through unwarranted belligerence.

Detractors of a rapprochement strategy along these lines will likely argue that offering technology and financial incentives to Iran would constitute appeasement of an implacably hostile regime, that Iran’s political leaders would disdain the offer, or that they would cynically negotiate in order to gain additional time to build their nuclear program.

The first two arguments can only be rebutted if the U.S. makes the offer, presenting Iran with generous terms demonstrating goodwill and respect for a proud and sovereign nation. The risk that Iran would use the offer to stall can be addressed by attaching a reasonable timeline to the negotiations, extending the timeline if necessary only on the condition that Iran places strict limits on its enrichment activities and cooperates fully with IAEA inspections in the immediate term.

Though the instinct of more hawkish advocates may be to dismiss any possibility of rapprochement, if an incentives-based approach fails the United States will have lost nothing. On the contrary, it will have strengthened its diplomatic position against the Iranian government by adding weight to the argument that the primary purpose of its nuclear program is to enable it to project coercive power throughout the region.

**Getting China to Push Iran to the Negotiating Table**

While China does not currently view Iran’s expanding nuclear program as a threat substantial enough to warrant truly constricting sanctions, U.S. diplomats should impress upon its leaders that interests diverge and loyalties shift. While a weak and isolated Iran might remain friendly toward China in the short term out of necessity, a nuclear-armed Iran might adopt a more independent, hegemonic foreign policy in the region, presenting energy security complications for a nation whose dependence on the Middle East will only increase as its economy continues to expand.

If the United States and European Union could convince China that its interests are actually aligned on Iran, the threat of a more thoroughly constricting sanctions regime might make a rapprochement offer more attractive.

As Kenneth Pollack, former director for Persian Gulf affairs at the National Security Council has written, the U.S. should offer Iran
“not just the willingness to end the UNSC sanctions and World Trade Organization membership that the Bush administration has proposed, but major positive incentives like investment guarantees, trade credits, an aid from international financial organizations….

Getting Khamene’i to go against his instincts…will require presenting Iran with stark and clear choices: isolation and destitution if it sticks with the hard-liners, acceptance and real prosperity if it is willing to change course. And both because the hard-liners are very powerful and the Iranian people are very proud, only if both the penalties for continued recalcitrance and the benefits of acquiescence are huge are they likely to push Iran’s populace and Khamene’i in the right direction.” (368-369)

The key is to avoid backing Iran into a corner with no way out or offering it inadequate incentives that would be viewed as a national humiliation if they were accepted.

A renewable energy offer can be summarily dismissed by hard-nosed political realists as a long shot- no substitute for the tempting prestige of a nuclear program –but with incentives enticing enough on the one hand and economic sanctions formidable enough on the other, Iran just might give it some serious consideration. If it does not, we will be left with the same difficult choices.

It is critical to acknowledge, however, that no matter how comprehensively a military strike on Iran might be war-gamed, war is ultimately still a roll of the dice. Therefore we have nothing to lose and everything to gain by investing further in the diplomatic track before committing ourselves to a course of action the consequences of which will likely be painful and extremely difficult to control.

About the Author

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