

To Strike or Not to Strike: What is the Endgame in Iran?

Written by Mira Rapp-Hooper

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MIRA RAPP-HOOPER, MAR 12 2012

The recent debate over whether to use military force against Iran's nuclear facilities has taken a narrow view of this policy option. Pundits have debated the feasibility of an Israeli strike, discussed the damage it could do to the Iranian program, and speculated on what kind of retaliation might follow. But the most important factor to consider is whether a sustained aerial campaign would accomplish the broader goal of keeping Iran non-nuclear indefinitely. Historical parallels, however imperfect, suggest that only a diplomatic solution can achieve this goal.

Indeed, few have suggested that an airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities would derail its atomic quest forever. Most agree that even in the best case scenario a major preventive operation would only serve to buy Israel and the international community additional time. Some estimates, including certain Israeli ones, have suggested that sustained air strikes could delay the Iran's nuclear program for as much as 3-5 years. Other sources, including Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, have suggested that 1-2 years is more likely. But once an initial strike was conducted, Iran would presumably move to reconstitute its program as quickly as possible. The country would probably push its nuclear infrastructure farther underground, focusing on hardened sites like its Fordow complex, which is built into a mountain.

U.S. and Israeli intelligence would likely detect efforts to rebuild the program. Nonetheless, there is a reasonable chance that the international community would find itself debating another round of air strikes in just a few years. An important part of Israel's strategic calculus then, is not just whether a single strike operation is feasible, but whether Tel Aviv is willing to consider follow-up action if the Iranian quest continues unabated, and with harder targets in the future. Even if Israeli policymakers are, in theory, willing to commit to multiple operations to obstruct the program's progress, the question still remains: What is the endgame? That is, how do airstrikes prevent a nuclear-armed Iran not just for 3-5 years, but permanently?

In assessing the utility of an Israeli strike, proponents often point to two previous Israeli operations against nascent nuclear powers. Despite what some have suggested, neither of these cases is a particularly promising parallel. In 2007, Israel leveled Syrian facilities that were at embryonic stages of development—this hardly describes the present Iranian infrastructure. Additionally, we now know that the 1981 Israeli strike on Iraq inspired Saddam to hurriedly rebuild his nuclear infrastructure in more impenetrable locations. Thus the Syrian case seems inapplicable to the current predicament, and the Iraq case is not encouraging.

It is also enlightening to investigate past cases where policymakers have considered and discarded military options against new proliferators. U.S. nuclear history is particularly instructive.

In 1963 and 1964, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson seriously considered strikes against Chinese nuclear facilities to prevent that country from acquiring an atomic capability. President Kennedy ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to assess the feasibility of this preventive option, and was told that, yes, the United States could level the PRC's facilities successfully. In 1994, the United States again considered preventive strikes against a nascent nuclear power—this time, North Korea. Once again, Pentagon assessments suggested that the US could conduct a successful strike against North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear complex.

In both cases, however, the administrations chose not to exercise this option. Their reasoning was simple: defense

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analysts in 1963-64 and 1994 knew that airstrikes could not derail the target program forever. China and North Korea were likely to rebuild their devastated programs within several years at most. If nothing had changed in either country's nuclear quest, the US would face the choice of launching additional airstrikes.

In each case policymakers considered what they could do with the 3-5 years that airstrike would buy them. In both instances, they decided that they would have to commence serious and sustained diplomatic engagement efforts with the target country after the strike was complete. Even if the United States resorted to military action, it still would have been up to China or to North Korea to forswear its own capability if either country were to remain non-nuclear indefinitely. The U.S. administrations all reasonably concluded that being attacked was unlikely to make either party more amenable to negotiations. Indeed, they would be even less willing to make serious concessions, and more determined to see their programs through to completion.

This historical parallel may not seem encouraging either. The US did not strike China or North Korea and both countries acquired independent nuclear capabilities in due course. Indeed, efforts to disarm North Korea continue apace today. But the analysis that led to these decisions was sound. In 1964 and 1994, policymakers decided against using military force despite knowing that diplomacy could fail, and that the target state could go nuclear within a few years. In both 1964 and 1994, US policymakers concluded that even if airstrikes were used, the endgame was a diplomatic one. No other instrument, including airstrikes, could keep China or North Korea from becoming nuclear powers in the long-term.

The implications for dealing with Iran are clear. Engaging Iran diplomatically has been no easy feat for the US and its allies. And although Ayatollah Khamenei has recently signaled a willingness to resume talks, many are skeptical that halting, frustrating diplomacy will produce a different outcome than it has in the past. But as the West considers military action as an alternative to negotiation, there is one paramount question: What do we buy with our 3-5 years? If a permanently non-nuclear Iran is still the endgame, the country itself must eventually choose the diplomatic course. Armed force, once again, will not serve these ends.

Fortunately, President Obama seems to recognize this reality. As he explained in a recent interview with the *Atlantic Monthly's* Jeffrey Goldberg, "It is important for us to see if we can solve this [Iran] thing permanently, as opposed to temporarily.... and the only way historically that a country has ultimately decided not to get nuclear weapons without constant military intervention has been when they themselves take [nuclear weapons] off the table. That's what happened in Libya, that's what happened in South Africa." Amid all the debate over whether to strike Iran or not, it is important to remember that this is the only way Iran will remain non-nuclear indefinitely.

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