

An Attack on Iran: Four 'No Ways' and One 'Maybe'

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, AUG 4 2012

Mitt Romney has returned from his quick foreign tour, having stopped by London and the Olympics, Israel and Poland. The American media, heavily favoring President Obama's reelection, mocked him for his supposed slights in London, his pandering in Jerusalem, and his abrasiveness in Warsaw. Mostly though, he was raising money, kissing babies, and promising to support bad ideas as presidential candidates have to do. Being at big events—the Olympics qualifies and Romney even ran one—as well as making the ethnic circuit is a must. Telling the Israelis we are with them is standard campaign rhetoric. The bit about moving the US embassy to Jerusalem may have to be walked back if Romney wins, but so will a lot of other things, the prime among them for both Romney and Obama being overstating our willingness to use force or support Israel's use of force in an attack against Iran's nuclear program. Neither one of them has quite said this yet, but their words are getting closer and closer to such a promise. And it is still weeks to the election, plenty of time to let the very words slip out.

There are four reasons I think the Iran walk back may turn into a run. One, eleven years of war has drained the pool of public support for interventions. Just two years ago the Obama administration was proclaiming America's determination never to abandon Afghanistan or Pakistan again in their fight for stability with the implication clearly being that our leaving the region after the Soviets failed in their Afghan war was the cause of 9/11. The promise still hangs out there, but the words are no longer said easily. The public is tired of the casualties, the corruption, and the costs. Putting Iran on the list of wars in progress will be very unpopular.

Two, the US is out of money. The US is running trillion dollar deficits. Obama's prized accomplishment, the Affordable Care Act is about to be implemented, and truth be told, it is unaffordable, built as it is on a half trillion dollar set of cuts in Medicare, the health care program for the elderly, that cannot possibly be achieved. Add to this the continuing slow recovery from the great recession and the promised cuts in government spending, including defense spending, and another war—the current one is working on its way through a second trillion dollars—is not affordable.

Three, the US military has its attention focused on anyplace but the Middle East. Junior officers have had their entire careers involved in deployment rotations to Iraq and Afghanistan. Enlisted soldiers and reservists need a break from combat tours. The military wants to park its MRAPs and reduce its UAV orbits. Just as after Vietnam where rebirth was in thinking about Europe and the Soviet threat, the US military is committed these days to thinking about the Pacific and the Chinese potential to threaten allies and deny the US access. It is a complex set of problems that happily doesn't have insurgents or deserts much in the mix. A fight with Iran will likely involve all sorts of operations and locations that find few champions these days in the US military.

Four, the international pressure on the US against taking action on its own or supporting Israel will be overwhelming. At a time when international cooperation on economic matters is crucial for avoiding a global economic collapse, the international financial community would be beside itself if it thought that the oil supply was being placed in jeopardy by a military strike and subsequent retaliations. Rough words, sanctions, and threats are fine, but mobilize for actual military operations and there will be great panic in the markets and the US government knows it.

But there is one maybe. With the US and Iran patrolling aggressively in the Persian Gulf a single incident involving an Iranian attack on a US ship could easily precipitate substantial US retaliation including attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities or support for Israeli action against them. Many a US war has started with an attack on a US warship or

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merchantman. The list is impressive: the War of 1812, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War all began with attacks at sea. There are indeed times when the attacks do not lead to war—Israel, North Korea, and Iraq have all attacked US warships (and in the case of North Korea captured one) without retaliation—but Iran should not bank on those cases. Israel and Iraq were allies who claimed the attacks were unintentional, and the North Korean attack came when the US was fully engaged in Vietnam. And then there is the case of the al Qaeda attack on the USS Cole in Yemen which produced no military response. But President Clinton was heavily criticized for not taking action. This failure is linked often in American politics to the 9/11 attacks as demonstrating the consequences of US inaction. Despite all the inhibitions described above – the four no ways – I think American politics could easily force the military strike on Iran that so many want to avoid if there were to be an attack on a US ship. The USS Cole is likely the controlling precedent.

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About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.