

## Strike or not to Strike Options on the Table to Stop Iran from Going Nuclear

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### Abstract

Latterly, various experts and political analysts have been hotly debating in the world press whether the West should strike Iran in order to stop its nuclear program. The first part of the article deals with argumentation whether to strike Iran in order to stop its nuclear program and simultaneously presents variant viewpoints on what specific threat nuclear-armed Iran poses. The second half of the article discusses a possible course of action the United States might take to curb Iran and consequential events. The article aims to arrive at a less destructive solution to the problem.

The article directs to the conclusion that Iran's aggressive foreign policy bears defensive nature driven by the self-survival instinct of an isolated country. The nuclear program also serves this very purpose to provide more security guarantees for the regime, minimize the risk of external strike and increase its bargaining power during the negotiations. Currently, the regional spoiler role is the only one to be played by Iran, enabling this developing and unformed economy country to resemble a great power player. Thus, if the United States does wish to neutralize nuclear-armed Iran and consequential threats, it should stop to isolate the latter from regional politics and let it become one of the building blocks of regional political security architecture, as this could assure Iran in the possibility of maintaining its security without going nuclear.

**Keywords:** containment, engagement, Iran, nuclear program, strike, sanctions, US foreign policy

### Introduction

Latterly, various experts and political analysts have been hotly debating in the world press whether the West should strike Iran in order to stop its nuclear program. This issue was discussed with particular intensity in the top-ranking analytical magazine "Foreign Affairs" where Mathew Kroenig's article "Time to Attack Iran" was responded by Colin H. Kahl with his article "Not Time to Attack Iran", whereas Kenneth N. Waltz's article "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb" was followed by Colin H. Kahl's article "Iran and the Bomb; Would a Nuclear Iran Make the Middle East More Secure?", etc.

The first part of the article deals with argumentation whether to strike Iran in order to stop its nuclear program and simultaneously presents variant viewpoints on what specific threat nuclear-armed Iran poses. The second half of the article discusses a possible course of action the United States might take to curb Iran and consequential events. The article aims to arrive at a less destructive solution to the problem.

### Debates – to Strike or not to Strike?!

No matter which side of the argument about the strike is favored, several fundamental questions are likely to arise having a considerable bearing on the debaters to keep arguing the right point. Among these fundamental issues are the rationality of Iranian political establishment and ideas about a possible range of actions nuclear-armed Iran might take. The article also discusses the effectiveness of military involvement whether to permanently keep Iran away from atomic arsenal or just to hold it awhile. Lastly, will the military involvement supposed to grow into a full-scale war be a less disastrous event or nuclear Iran?

The supporters of hitting Iran consider Iranian leaders to be irrational and unpredictable, and find it impossible to say how this country will react if had a nuclear bomb. In this regard, Mathew Kroenig highlights a few basic dangers in his article "Time to Attack Iran" published in "Foreign Affairs" in February 2012: With atomic power behind it, Iran could threaten any U.S. political or military initiative in the Middle East with nuclear war, forcing Washington to think twice before acting in the region. Also, Iran's regional rivals would possibly attempt to make their own nuclear arsenal that is bound to cause a nuclear arms race in this hot spot of the world. Kroenig also takes the idea

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that Iran could choose to spur proliferation by transferring nuclear technology to its allies - other countries and terrorist groups alike. Having the bomb would give Iran greater cover for conventional aggression and coercive diplomacy, and the battles between its terrorist proxies and Israel, for example, could escalate (Kroening, 2012).

Kroening along with other assault supporters think that the United States would run into large costs for a long period of time spanning even several decades: "To keep the Iranian threat at bay, the United States would need to deploy naval and ground units and potentially nuclear weapons across the Middle East, keeping a large force in the area for decades to come. ... It would also need to devote perhaps billions of dollars to improving its allies' capability to defend themselves. Most of all, to make containment credible, the United States would need to extend its nuclear umbrella to its partners in the region. In other words, to contain a nuclear Iran, the United States would need to make a substantial investment of political and military capital to the Middle East in the midst of an economic crisis" (Kroening, 2012).

It must also be realized that some Middle East countries now considered to be US allies might possibly get closer to Iran due to the threats to their security. Moreover, they may think that if US failed to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear, it may also fail to protect them and keep peace in the region.

Kroening finally comes to the solution according which if a right action is taken a full-scale war could be avoided: Strike must be exercised on directly Iran's nuclear program and a sharp message must be sent to the Iranian political leaders that the assault must not be taken as an action for removing them from power leading them not to face a self-survival and make more rational and moderate responses. Furthermore, The United states should establish specific red lines after which a war would be inevitable jeopardizing the Iranian regime. Blocking the Strait of Hormuz, striking Israel and any US regional allies or destroying US military units in the Middle East would be taken as crossing those red lines by Iran.

The Opponents of striking Iran do not usually find the Iranian ruling regime irrational and think that Iran is motivated to have nuclear arms for security reasons and believe that the atomic bomb is not end but just means for increased security thus making Iran rational and predictable. Faction still takes place whether to be possible either to convince or make Iran abandon its nuclear program. Some researchers believe that through harsh sanctions and international pressure together with effective diplomacy, Iran could be made to take a right choice between consequent scenarios. Other researchers think that Iran will not abandon its nuclear program for two reasons: On the one hand the ruling regime has successfully managed to speculate with this program on national pride and on the other hand increasing inter-

national pressure would push it to get nuclear as soon as possible to remain secure from the opposing powers.

Kroening's article was soon caught on by the opponents of attacking Iran. Colin H. Kahl's article „Not Time to Attack“ and Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro's article „The Flawed Logic of Striking Iran“ are noteworthy in this respect who criticize Kroening for believing that Iran would not respond to a strike with its "worst forms of retaliation, such as closing the Strait of Hormuz or launching missiles at southern Europe" unless its leaders felt that the regime's "very existence was threatened." (Kroening, 2012). They maintain that through establishing the red lines by US, a full-scale war would be avoided. They find Kroening's arguments controversial since ironically, Kroening believes that a nuclear-armed Iran would be deeply irrational and prone to miscalculation yet somehow maintains that under the same leaders, Iran would make clear-eyed decisions in the immediate aftermath of a U.S. strike and do not further aggravate the conflict. It is also doubtful that Iranian regime will not take the strike on nuclear objects as a direct threat to themselves as Iranian leaders have staked their domestic legitimacy on resisting international pressure to halt the nuclear program, and so they would inevitably view an attack on that program as an attack on the regime itself. (Kahl, Not Time to Attack, 2012).

The opponents of military confrontation with Iran see a particular threat in such a full-scale conflict that would draw other regional countries into the war. Israel is most likely to be the first, being especially favorable for Iran since its possible ally plans would significantly diminish regional Arab countries' support to the United States in that operation. Hezbollah encouraged by Iran could launch a strike on Israel which would strike back at Lebanon. Kahl does not also eliminate possible Saudi Arabian and UAE involvement in the conflict as Riyadh's confrontational posture against Iran is obvious. It is unlikely to tolerate Iranian attacks against critical energy infrastructure. For its part, the UAE the most hawkish state in the Gulf, might respond to missiles raining down on U.S. forces at its Al Dhafra Air Base by attempting to seize Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb, three disputed Gulf islands currently occupied by Iran. (Kahl, Not Time to Attack, 2012).

Another important threat arising from possible US strike against Iran is the reason through which religious extremists could wage an anti-American wave that according to Kahl would be used to transform the Arab Spring's populist anti-regime narrative into a decidedly anti-American one. The United States would find it hard to justify its actions and persuade the regional population in the opposite as Iran would be the third Muslim country US launched a war against since the beginning of the 21st century, in a so small period of time. It would open doors to Iran to play a victim role to obtain more support as a fighter against US and the West in the region.

The opponents of striking Iran dismiss the idea that the US would not manage to stop Iran due to extremely large costs. They maintain that the US would not need to deploy many additional forces in the region since it already has a large presence encircling Iran and the existing U.S. presence in the region, perhaps supplemented by a limited forward deployment of nuclear weapons and additional ballistic missile defenses would be sufficient to deter a nuclear-armed Iran from aggression and blackmail. (Kahl, Not Time to Attack, 2012)

Another debatable issue looms from the threat of nuclear proliferation in case of Iran's atomic armament. It has been suggested that if nuclear-armed, Iran could provide certain non-sovereign states and terrorist groups with nuclear weapons. Moreover, Iranian membership to the atomic club could raise nuclear arms race among regional powers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq and even Turkey.

The first issue of nuclear proliferation by Iran is almost impossible due to two reasons: on the one hand, Iran would not act undetected and on the other hand, as noted by Waltz, countries can never entirely control or even predict the behavior of the terrorist groups they sponsor. (Waltz, 2012), making Iran faces two equally dangerous challenges.

Regarding the threat of arms race in the Middle East from nuclear Iran, controversial questions spark as well. Waltz believes that If an atomic Israel, which was at war with many of its neighbors and posed a much bigger threat to Arab world, did not trigger an arms race then, there is no reason a nuclear Iran should now. (Waltz, 2012) Besides this, as Debs and Monteiro note, the fact that none of the countries, which are expected to get engaged in nuclear arms race, did not do so in response to Israel's nuclearization, against which they could not count on U.S. backing, makes it less possible that they will change their behavior in case of Iran's nuclearization against which they can definitely count on US support. The authors believe that existing U.S. security guarantees, based on current capabilities, give allies little incentive to nuclearize – "Egypt and Saudi Arabia are among the largest recipients of U.S. military support, and Turkey is a member of NATO. Reinforcing U.S. ties with friends in the region would be easier, cheaper, and less risky than attacking the Iranian nuclear program." (Debs & Monteiro, 2012)

The truth is that the strike on Iran would not fully stop Iran but would just postpone for a while. Accordingly, the assault would not solve the problem, but only delay it, since Iran would be left with nuclear "know-how" and a stronger desire to get nuclear weapons as soon as possible to avoid possible future strikes.

### **Debates: Shall a Nuclear Iran Bring More Peace or More Instability in the Region?**

Kenneth N. Waltz' article "Why Iran Should Get the

Bomb" has recently got on the public radar screen where Waltz claims that the Middle East will become a more peaceful place after Iran gets nuclearized. Furthermore, Waltz maintains that the only source of instability is nuclear Israel which through its unbalanced power poses a threat to the regional states: "It is Israel's nuclear arsenal, not Iran's desire for one, that has contributed most to the current crisis. ... If Iran goes nuclear, Israel and Iran will deter each other, as nuclear powers always have." (Waltz, 2012). Waltz also believes that it is far more likely that if Iran desires nuclear weapons, it is for the purpose of providing for its own security, not to improve its offensive capabilities - or destroy itself. Waltz thinks that possible Iranian employment of it nuclear weapons against Israel or any US allies would invite massive retaliation and risk destroying everything the Iranian regime holds dear. However, Iran's leaders despite their inflammatory and hateful rhetoric, show no propensity for self-destruction. (Waltz, 2012).

Waltz's article was soon responded by Colin H. Kahl's article "Iran and the Bomb -Would a Nuclear Iran Make the Middle East More Secure?". Kahl believes that Iran's nuclearization would trigger off the kind of situation which known as "the stability-instability paradox," in which the supposed stability created by mutually assured destruction generates greater instability by making provocations, disputes, and conflict below the nuclear threshold seem safe. Thus, Kahl takes the idea that a nuclear-armed Iran, believing that it possessed a powerful deterrent and could thus commit violence abroad with near impunity, might increase the frequency and scale of aggression, engage in coercive diplomacy and blackmail its neighbors. (Kahl, 2012)

Kahl's criticism was immediately reacted by Waltz in "Foreign Affairs" where he agrees with Kahl over the point that nuclear stability permits lower-level violence. Taking advantage of the protection that their atomic arsenals provide, nuclear-armed states can feel freer to make minor incursions, deploy terrorism, and engage in generally annoying behavior. But, Waltz notes, the question is how significant these disruptive behaviors are compared with the peace and stability that nuclear weapons produce. Waltz believes that nuclear weapons prevent minor conflicts from becoming major wars. (Waltz, Waltz Replies, 2012)

### **Rational or Irrational?**

The question of rationality of the Iranian regime, as noted above, comes first in the discussions of nuclear-armed Iranian threats. Those, who find Iranian authorities irrational, believe that it is almost impossible to foresee how they will react being nuclearized. It will be a huge threat equally against to the region, the West and particularly the United States. That's why those people predict nuclear deterrence and containment will not work.

The quite opposite is supposed by the individuals who see Iranian regime as rational and pragmatic. Most people, thinking likewise (e.g. Waltz, Mearsheimer, Zakaria) believe Iran's every action taken on the international arena is driven by the instinct of self-survival and security. Their nuclear program also falls into this category enabling to predict Iran's future actions and successful containment policy application by the West, because, despite the hysterical rhetoric by the Iranian authorities they seem to be less likely intent on self-destruction. Otherwise, it would be inevitable in case of possible realization of their threats.

The final answer to the question of Iran's rationality involves two sorts of rhetoric used domestically and internationally by the Iranian regime, often gone undivided by the western politicians. They should pay more attention to the messages sent to the international community rather than ones intended for domestic use.

Focusing on domestic rhetoric prevents western politicians from seeing pragmatism and realism Iran's foreign policy is guided with. The entire Iranian foreign strategy is purely motivated by the issues of basic security and is often mistakenly named the source of religious fundamentalism and ideology by the West. Furthermore, some researchers have called Iran's aggressive foreign policy kind of "offensive defense" or defense through active military engagement" (Barzegar, 2010, pp.173-189).

There are pretty many examples of Iran's pragmatic and rational foreign policy, among which so called Iran-Contra scandal of Iran-Iraq war serves best. The scandal involved then-US administration, Israel and Iran. The case was that during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran had already exhausted the Shah-times military arsenal and was beset to obtain the needed amount of ammunition due to the sanctions forbidding military trade with Iran. The Reagan administration thought that if sold out some weapons secretly to Iran it would have a positive effect on the hostage crisis case and the administration would have enough financial resources to fund the Nicaraguan Contras, officially forbidden by Congress. The most interesting thing in that case was the fact that Iran was supplied with US weapons through Israel called (Great Satan) by Iran. It proves that when vitally concerned, Iran can foreground pragmatic actions and set aside religious principles.

Iran's support of Christian Armenia in the Karabakh conflict rather than Shiite Azerbaijan bespeaks the victory of realism over religious principles. Iran is also pragmatically motivated while assisting Hezbollah and Hamas: on the one hand Iran receives favor from the regional Muslim populations promoting anti-Israeli forces. On the other hand Iran keeps its major enemy's attention focused on another side making difficult for Israel being fully concentrated on Tehran. It's noteworthy that despite hysterical rhetoric towards Israel, Iran has always sought to avoid a full-scale conflict with the Jewish state.

Iran was pragmatically thinking while supporting Iraqi Shiite groups. Trying to intensify ties with Iraqi Shiite authorities, Iran intended to make the possible future regional rival less dangerous.

Iran's reformist leaders' attempts to rearrange relations with US are another example of pragmatism being misjudged by the latter in the past. Yet, Rafsanjani tried to restore economic ties with the United States. He declared in his 1994 interview: "I have always been opposed to completely breaking our ties with the United States, they provide us with much needed spare parts and we sell them petrol. Therefore, our economic ties have ever been completely halted and some kind of dialogue must always exist. Although we pursue pragmatism in foreign policy, we will not be the first to initiate further dialogue with the Americans. Though, Iran's initiative was soon followed by the Clinton administration's new "comprehensive sanctions" to "deal with the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States constituted by the actions and policies of the Government of Iran." (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009, pp.7-35)

The United States had missed another chance to normalize relations with Iran. Despite the Khatam's cooperation with US during the Afghan mission, George Bush in his 2002 State of the Union speech after 9/11 called Iran "axis of evil" together with North Korea and Iraq. The inconsiderate US action put Iran's reformist president into an awkward position inside his country who had previously sought to remedy the ties with the United States, resulting the hardliners to strengthen in Tehran.

While discussing rationality and pragmatism of the Iranian regime, it should be noted that their nuclear program is also derived from the vital interests of the country. The declaration to develop a nuclear program is absolutely legitimate by Iran, since from the second half of the century its oil resources will begin to diminish and the country will certainly need alternative means of energy and it is timely to think about it right now. The true purpose of the nuclear program is surely the security of Iranian regime that can be obtained by finally getting an atomic bomb. The environment Iran has to live in does urge it to think about security measures. Iran as a non-Arab Shiite country faces many challenges in the region where the majority is composed of hostile Sunnite Arabic nations. Iran is surrounded by nuclear-armed countries including Israel, Russia, China, India and Pakistan, not to mention some US military units stationed near the Iranian border. The region has been in a constant state of instability for last few decades, sometimes grown into full-scale regional wars or small conflicts during the Cold War. The United States with a clear wish of change in the Iranian leadership, has launched two wars in regional Muslim countries in the last decade that resulted in replacing the existing governments and remaining US troops there for a certain time also sending a warning sig-

nal to Iran. It is interesting to note that the United States has never invaded nuclearized North Korea frequently named a part of “axis of evil”, leading us believe the Iran’s nuclear program serves to meet vital security needs of both its sovereignty and government.

Iran’s aggressive foreign policy can simply be said to bear an absolutely defensive nature and is quite rational and pragmatic seeking to provide it with vital security guarantees. This fact casts a shadow over the arguments that it is impossible to predict Iran’s future actions and contain it and on the contrary, consolidates the opposite claims that nuclear Iran will not take a step in the future to cause a strike against it leading to its complete destruction.

### Options on the Table

The United States has four possible courses of action against Iran’s nuclear program: strike, sanctions and other non-military means, diplomatic engagement, and containment. At the beginning of the article there were some ideas about negative results of strike involving full-scale and lengthy war with no clear exit strategy. The war would help Iran play a role of victim and gain a considerable amount of support from the regional populations as a front-line fighter against the “Great Satan”. The ultimate negative side of the strike would be its inability not to fully stop the nuclear program but postpone it for certain time. Even in the case of complete destruction of Iran’s nuclear arsenal, the “know-how” will be remaining in the country only increasing the desire to rebuild an atomic bomb to avoid any future risks of hitting.

Regarding the sanctions applied against Iran by the west, they are doomed to failure for several reasons: first, Russia, China and some other non-Western countries reveal their readiness to continue cooperation with Iran even under sanctions. The same can be said about Iranian market, if it goes unoccupied by the West, the job will be done by the East relieving the loss by Iran. Second, the sanctions would have negative influence not only on the regime but on the Iranian people whose anger would be directed against the West and the United States casting the regime as a victim and the US as an enemy. Third, the Iranian government would always find some so called “black holes” through which illegal revenue could be received directly not by the country self but by the regime. In the end, pressure with sanctions would make Iran more committed to get a nuclear weapon soon to intensify bargaining power in any negotiations to avoid any future chance of being a victim of outside pressure.

As for the diplomatic engagement, US and Iran had a good chance to do so from the second half of 1990s to 2002 when Iran’s reformist presidents publicly declared their wish of restoring ties with the US preceded by possible economic relations restoration. Assisting the US in the war

in Afghanistan against Taliban in 2001 can be considered another important step in correcting the relations. Unfortunately, the US failed to adequately assess the situation during both Clinton and Bush administrations resulting in loss of trust by the Iranian people to reformist president Khatam’s foreign policy leading to electing more anti-Western Mahmud Ahmadinejad.

Diplomatic engagement got another chance when Barack Obama was elected and directed US foreign policy towards correcting American image in the Muslim world from the very beginning of his presidency. His famous speech in Cairo contained a very clear message of re-engagement. His video address to the Iranian people for Persian New Year served this purpose as well. The change in US rhetoric had no any tangible moves in interaction with Iran that did not gone unnoticed by the Iranian political elite.

Obama’s Middle East policy was adequately seen by Iran as an attempt to isolate and to curb their influence in the region. Obama who radically changed his predecessor’s foreign doctrine in an attempt to restore the US image in the world almost left the Bush policy towards Iran intact responded by Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini for Obama’s New Year address as a change in Iranian attitudes would be contingent on “genuine” and “real” changes in the U.S. position vis-à-vis Iran. (Barzegar, 2010, pp.173-189)

If the United States is really focused on improving relations with Iran and plans to convince Iran in abandoning the nuclear program based on restored mutual trust, it must realize that more Iran is cornered more aggressive policy it may apply in the region in terms of assisting certain terrorist groups and other regional spoilers. After the United States awakens to the realization that the region cannot be secured at the expense of Iran and allows the latter to integrate into the regional political-security architecture, more constructive relations may arise. Otherwise, while the West naively discusses possible regime change in Iran or the ways of grabbing advantage of Iran’s domestic political movements, self-survival instinct will force the Iranian leaders to oppose US and its allies’ regional interests, keep aggressive and hysteric rhetoric against Israel and back the terrorist groups fighting against it enabling Iran to cast itself as a Muslim opposition leader gaining significant support from the regional Islamic nations.

Today we can say that a bridge of trust between Iran and US is destroyed and the Obama administration has failed to reconstruct it so far, minimizing the chances for the United States to convince Iran in abandoning the nuclear program through diplomatic engagement or offering some grand bargain. Thus, the situation pushes the US to think about a containment policy and ways of its possible implementation since it might be the only alternative to the Iranian nuclear program.

It should be noted that the United States has enough troops in the region for engaging into a containment policy with no need to increase them in number. The US would have to deploy additional nuclear weapons and antimissile systems. Also, the US would have to extend its security umbrella over regional allies. Apart from being responsible for allies' security to keep them in its orbit, the US should never fail to provide them with adequate security guarantees to avoid see them on the path to building nuclear arms of their own. It would be a total collapse of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty having a very negative bearing on the global security.

It is interesting to note that as some researchers feel the US containment policy if put in practice, may serve as a demotivating factor for Iran's nuclear program after realizing the consequential growth of US military presence in the region and rising support among Arabic nations to the United States resulting in diminishing Iran's positions and security in the region.

### Conclusion

In the end we can conclude that Iran's aggressive foreign policy bears defensive nature driven by the self-survival instinct of an isolated country. The nuclear program also serves this very purpose to provide more security guarantees for the regime and minimize the risk of external strike. Iran tries to force the West to get to the negotiating table and intensify its bargaining power during the talks to be more respected by both regional and international republics.

The regional spoiler role is the only one to be played by Iran today, enabling this developing and unformed economy country to resemble a great power player. Thus, if the United States does wish to neutralize nuclear-armed Iran and consequential threats, it should stop to isolate the latter from regional politics since cornered Iran is more aggressive, proved by many factors.

The only option on the table for the US is diplomatic engagement with Iran if strikes on nuclear facilities and pressure with sanctions both fail. This option could be put in practice after the United States stops isolating Iran from regional politics and let this country become one of the building blocks of regional political security architecture. Correspondingly, the nuclear program would likely be removed from the list of Iran's top priorities unlike the current situation.

Unfortunately, it should be noted that the United States under Obama administration has failed to restore the lost mutual trust between the two countries so far. Moreover, as previously stated, despite the US incumbent president has successfully managed to correct the US image throughout the world and improved relations with leading nations, he has left his predecessor's policies with Iran almost in-

tact except that rhetoric. Hoping that US will ultimately achieve Iran's abandonment of its nuclear program through diplomatic engagement seems less realistic due to above mentioned US course of actions, making the latter think about a containment policy of nuclear Iran concurrently. Still, the situation does not rule out slight chances for US to avoid face nuclear Iran through diplomacy. Hopefully, during his second term in office, Obama free from any reelection campaigning, will find it in himself to handle opponents' accusations of his weakness and launch a more effective policy towards Iran in terms of diplomatic engagement.

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