



History Shows that President Obama is Wise to Retain a Military Option to Cripple Iran's Nuclear Facilities

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The deadline of July 20, 2014 looms as a watershed for international negotiations with Iran over the future of its disputed nuclear program. Will Iranian authorities agree to put meaningful constraints on its nuclear capabilities – and do so in a way that is internationally verifiable? Nearly all observers are hoping for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, but the current negotiations have not been easy, and in June the United States and Iran conducted additional, bilateral conversations in an attempt reach an agreement as negotiations enter a critical phase. If diplomacy fails to curb Iran's nuclear program, President Barack Obama has threatened to use military force, if necessary, to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Is this U.S. threat wise? Critics of the President's threat to use force have argued that a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities would be ineffective, if not counterproductive, because it would merely encourage Iran to redouble its efforts to build a bomb. A U.S. military strike, critics say, could end up speeding the very outcome international negotiators are trying to prevent. A look to the historical record of preventive strikes on nuclear facilities, however, teaches a very different lesson and suggests that President Obama is correct to keep the military option on the table.

What Military Strikes Have Accomplished in the Past

There have only been four countries in history that have had their nuclear facilities targeted in military strikes: Germany during World War II and much more recently Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Tellingly, not one of those countries possesses nuclear weapons today.

- Following Allied strikes on Nazi Germany's nuclear plants, Germany lost World War II and a new government came to power that joined the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and permanently renounced attempts to build nuclear weapons.
- During the Iran-Iraq War of 1980 to 1988, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein bombed Iran's nuclear program. Since that time, Iran has slowly and methodically reconstructed a nuclear infrastructure, but more than thirty years after the attacks Iran still does not have nuclear weapons.
- Iraq's nuclear program was delayed by a 1981 Israeli strike on the Osiraq reactor. This helped to buy time until the United States bombed Iraq's nuclear sites in the First Persian Gulf War in 1991. Later it was learned that after this devastating defeat, Saddam Hussein decided to suspend his nuclear program. In 2003, he was removed from power altogether.
- Finally, in the early 2000s, Syria secretly built a nuclear reactor with help from North Korea, but Israel destroyed the facility in a 2007 preventive strike. After that, Syria's leaders did not immediately reconstitute the nuclear program and in the spring of 2011, Syria became engulfed in a civil war that has left its government preoccupied with fighting insurgent forces.

Some argue that the 1981 Israeli attack on Iraq's Osiraq reactor was a failure because it caused Saddam Hussein to increase spending on his nuclear program. But such claims reflect a poor technical understanding of nuclear issues. Before the attack, Iraq was following the relatively simple plutonium path to the bomb, but the destruction of the nuclear reactor forced the country to turn to uranium enrichment, a much more difficult path. Iraq spent more money after 1981, because the job of creating nuclear weapons had become much harder. Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq flailed around for a decade trying several different enrichment technologies and never made much progress.

In all four cases, therefore, military strikes created time for other events to intervene to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. What history teaches us, therefore, is that military strikes on nuclear facilities have been a decisive nonproliferation tool, at least so far.

June 27, 2014

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How Military Strikes Could Work Again in Iran

To be sure, many factors contributed to the past blockage of national nuclear projects and critics would be correct to point out that there is no guarantee that future military strikes would work out in the same way. But the fact remains that no country that has had its nuclear facilities bombed has ever gone on actually to build nuclear weapons – and we cannot be certain that these past nonnuclear outcomes would have been achieved absent military action against Germany, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

The history I have just summarized prompts me to conclude that, if current international negotiations with Iran fail, a U.S. strike on Iran's present-day nuclear facilities would most likely significantly delay Iran's efforts to build nuclear weapons. According to the best available expert estimates, a U.S. military strike against its nuclear facilities would at a minimum delay Iran by three to five years in reconstituting its nuclear program. In a geopolitically turbulent world, that is a politically meaningful delay – which could very well mean that, in the end, Iran would never become a nuclear power.

To be sure, any military action carries many risks, but those risks must be weighed against the very real dangers to the region and world peace of living with a nuclear-armed Iran for decades to come. In my view, the risks of a nuclear-armed Iran are greater than the risks from a U.S. strike against the country's nascent nuclear facilities, should current international negotiations fail.

There is no doubt that the United States must strive for a diplomatic resolution to the current crisis over Iran's nuclear military ambitions. But Americans and others who want to block nuclear militarization in Iran can rest assured that, if negotiations fail, there is another potent arrow in the U.S. quiver. History teaches the lesson that foreign military strikes against the incipient nuclear weapons programs of aggressive nations can in the end prevent the emergence of dangerous new nuclear-armed powers in our volatile world.

Read more in Matthew Kroenig, *A Time to Attack: The Looming Iranian Nuclear Threat* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).