

War Plans: United States and Iran

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A possible U.S. attack against Iran has been a hot topic in the news for many months now. In some quarters it has become an article of faith that the Bush administration intends to order such an attack before it leaves office. It remains a mystery whether the administration plans an actual attack or whether it is using the threat of attack to try to intimidate Iran -- and thus shape its behavior in Iraq and elsewhere. Unraveling the mystery lies, at least in part, in examining what a U.S. attack would look like, given U.S. goals and resources, as well as in considering the potential Iranian response. Before turning to intentions, it is important to discuss the desired outcomes and capabilities. Unfortunately, those discussions have taken a backseat to speculations about the sheer probability of war.

Let's begin with goals. What would the United States hope to achieve by attacking Iran? On the broadest strategic level, the answer is actually quite simple. After 9/11, the United States launched counterstrikes in the Islamic world. The goal was to disrupt the al Qaeda core in order to prevent further attacks against the United States. The counterstrikes also were aimed at preventing the emergence of a follow-on threat from the Islamic world that would replace the threat that had been posed by al Qaeda. The disruption of all Islamic centers of power that have the ability and intent to launch terrorist attacks against the United States is a general goal of U.S. strategy. With the decline of Sunni radicalism, Iran has emerged as an alternative Shiite threat. Hence, under this logic, Iran must be dealt with.

Obviously, the greater the disruption of radically anti-American elements in the Islamic world, the better it is for the United States. But there are three problems here. First, the United States has a far more complex relationship with Iran than it does with al Qaeda. Iran supported the U.S. attack against the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as the U.S. invasion of Iraq -- for its own reasons, of course. Second, the grand strategy of the United States might include annihilating Islamic radicalism, but at the end of the day, maintaining the balance of power between Sunnis and Shia and between Arab and non-Arab Muslims is a far more practical approach. Finally, the question of what to do about Iran depends on the military capabilities of the United States in the immediate future. The intentions are shaped by the capabilities.

What, therefore, would the U.S. goals be in an attack against Iran? They divide into three (not mutually exclusive) strategies:

1. Eliminating Iran's nuclear program.
2. Crippling Iran by hitting its internal infrastructure -- political, industrial and military -- ideally forcing regime change that would favor U.S. interests.
3. Using an attack -- or threatening an attack -- to change Iranian behavior in Iraq, Lebanon or other areas of the world.

It is important to note the option that is not on the table: invasion by U.S. ground forces, beyond the possible use of small numbers of Special Operations forces. Regardless of the state of Iranian conventional forces after a sustained air attack, the United States simply does not have the numbers of ground troops needed to invade and occupy Iran -- particularly given the geography and topography of the country. Therefore, any U.S. attack would rely on the forces available, namely air and naval forces.

The destruction of Iran's nuclear capabilities would be the easiest to achieve, assuming that U.S. intelligence has a clear picture of the infrastructure of that program and that the infrastructure has not been hardened to the point of being invulnerable to conventional attack. Iran, however, learned a great deal from Iraq's Osirak experience and has spread out and hardened its nuclear facilities. Also, given Iran's location and the proximity of U.S. forces and allies, we can assume the United States would not be interested in a massive nuclear attack with the resulting fallout. Moreover, we would argue that, in a world of proliferation, it would not be in the interest of the United States to set a precedent by being the first use to use nuclear weapons since World War II.

Therefore, the U.S. option is to carry out precision strikes against Iran's nuclear program using air- and sea-launched munitions. As a threat, this is an interesting option. As an actual operation, it is less interesting. First, the available

evidence is that Iran is years away from achieving a deliverable nuclear weapon. Second, Iran might be more interested in trading its nuclear program for other political benefits -- specifically in Iraq. An attack against the country's nuclear facilities would make Tehran less motivated than before to change its behavior. Furthermore, even if its facilities were destroyed, Iran would retain its capabilities in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere in the world. Therefore, unless the United States believed there was an imminent threat of the creation of a deliverable nuclear system, the destruction of a long-term program would eliminate the long-term threat, but leave Iran's short-term capabilities intact. Barring imminent deployment, a stand-alone attack against Iran's nuclear capabilities makes little sense.

That leaves the second option -- a much broader air and sea campaign against Iran. This would have four potential components:

1. Attacks against its economic infrastructure, particularly its refineries.
2. Attacks against its military infrastructure.
3. Attacks against its political infrastructure, particularly its leadership.
4. A blockade and sanctions.

Let's begin in reverse order. The United States has the ability to blockade Iran's ports, limiting the importation of oil and refined products, as well as food. It does not have the ability to impose a general land blockade against Iran, which has long land borders, including with Iraq. Because the United States lacks the military capability to seal those borders, goods from around Iran's periphery would continue to flow, including, we emphasize, from Iraq, where U.S. control of transportation systems, particularly in the Shiite south, is limited. In addition, it is unclear whether the United States would be willing to intercept, board and seize ships from third-party countries (Russia, China and a large number of small countries) that are not prepared to participate in sanctions or might not choose to respect an embargo. The United States is stretched thin, and everyone knows it. A blockade could invite deliberate challenges, while enforcement would justify other actions against U.S. interests elsewhere. Any blockade strategy assumes that Iran is internationally isolated, which it is not, that the United States can impose a military blockade on land, which it cannot, and that it can withstand the consequences elsewhere should a third party use U.S. actions to justify counteraction, which is questionable. A blockade could hurt Iran's energy economy, but Iran has been preparing for this for years and can mitigate the effect by extensive smuggling operations. Ultimately, Iran is not likely to crumble unless the United States can maintain and strengthen the blockade process over a matter of many months at the very least.

Another option is a decapitation strike against Iran's leadership -- though it is important to recall how this strategy failed in Iraq at the beginning of the 2003 invasion. Decapitation assumes superb intelligence on the location of the leadership at a given time -- and that level of intelligence is hard to come by. Iraq had a much smaller political elite than Iran has, and the United States couldn't nail down its whereabouts. It also is important to remember that Iran has a much deeper and more diverse leadership structure than Iraq had. Iraq's highly centralized system included few significant leaders. Iran is more decentralized and thus has a much larger and deeper leadership cadre. We doubt the United States has the real-time intelligence capability to carry out such a broad decapitation strike.

The second option is an assault against the Iranian military. Obviously, the United States has the ability to carry out a very effective assault against the military's technical infrastructure -- air defense, command and control, aircraft, armor and so on. But the Iranian military is primarily an infantry force, designed for internal control and operations in mountainous terrain -- the bulk of Iran's borders. Once combat operations began, the force would disperse and tend to become indistinguishable from the general population. A counterpersonnel operation would rapidly become a counterpopulation operation. Under any circumstances, an attack against a dispersed personnel pool numbering in the high hundreds of thousands would be sortie intensive, to say the least. An air campaign designed to impose high attrition on an infantry force, leaving aside civilian casualties, would require an extremely large number of sorties, in which the use of precision-guided munitions would be of minimal value and the use of area weapons would be at a premium. Given the fog of war and intelligence issues, the ability to evaluate the status of this campaign would be questionable.

In our view, the Iranians are prepared to lose their technical infrastructure and devolve command and control to regional and local levels. The collapse of the armed forces -- most of whose senior officers and noncoms fought in the Iran-Iraq war with very flexible command and control -- is unlikely. The force would continue to be able to control the frontiers as well as maintain internal security functions. The United States would rapidly establish command of the air, and destroy noninfantry forces. But even here there is a cautionary note. In Yugoslavia, the United States learned that relatively simple camouflage and deception techniques were quite effective in protecting tactical assets. The Iranians have studied both the Kosovo war and U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and have extensive tactical combat experience themselves. A forced collapse from the air of the Iranian infantry capability -- the backbone of Iran's military -- is unlikely.

This leaves a direct assault against the Iranian economic infrastructure. Although this is the most promising path, it must be remembered that counterinfrastructure and counterpopulation strategic air operations have been tried extensively. The assumption has been that the economic cost of resistance would drive a wedge between the population and the regime, but there is no precedent in the history of air campaigns for this assumption. Such operations have succeeded in only two instances: Japan and Kosovo. In Japan, counterpopulation operations of massive proportions involving conventional weapons were followed by two atomic strikes. Even in that case, there was no split between regime and

population, but a decision by the regime to capitulate. The occupation in Kosovo was not so much because of military success as diplomatic isolation. That isolation is not likely to happen in Iran.

In all other cases -- Britain, Germany, Vietnam, Iraq -- air campaigns by themselves did not split the population from the regime or force the regime to change course. In Britain and Vietnam, the campaigns failed completely. In Germany and Iraq (and Kuwait), they succeeded because of follow-on attacks by overwhelming ground forces.

The United States could indeed inflict heavy economic hardship, but history suggests that this is more likely to tighten the people's identification with the government -- not the other way around. In most circumstances, air campaigns have solidified the regime's control over the population, allowing it to justify extreme security measures and generating a condition of intense psychological resistance. In no case has a campaign led to an uprising against the regime. Moreover, a meaningful campaign against economic infrastructure would take some 4 million barrels per day off of the global oil market at a time when oil prices already are closing in on \$100 a barrel. Such a campaign is more likely to drive a wedge between the American people and the American government than between the Iranians and their government.

For an air campaign to work, the attacking power must be prepared to bring in an army on the ground to defeat the army that has been weakened by the air campaign -- a tactic Israel failed to apply last summer in Lebanon. Combined arms operations do work, repeatedly. But the condition of the U.S. Army and Marines does not permit the opening of a new theater of operations in Iran. Most important, even if conditions did permit the use of U.S. ground forces to engage and defeat the Iranian army -- a massive operation simply by the size of the country -- the United States does not have the ability to occupy Iran against a hostile population. The Japanese and German nations were crushed completely over many years before an overwhelming force occupied them. What was present there, but not in Iraq, was overwhelming force. That is not an option for Iran.

Finally, consider the Iranian response. Iran does not expect to defeat the U.S. Air Force or Navy, although the use of mine warfare and anti-ship cruise missiles against tankers in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz should not be dismissed. The Iranian solution would be classically asymmetrical. First, they would respond in Iraq, using their assets in the country to further complicate the occupation, as well as to impose as many casualties as possible on the United States. And they would use their forces to increase the difficulty of moving supplies from Kuwait to U.S. forces in central Iraq. They also would try to respond globally using their own forces (the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), as well as Hezbollah and other trained Shiite militant assets, to carry out counterpopulation attacks against U.S. assets around the world, including in the United States.

If the goal is to eliminate Iran's nuclear program, we expect the United States would be able to carry out the mission. If, however, the goal is to compel a change in the Iranian regime or Iranian policy, we do not think the United States can succeed with air forces alone. It would need to be prepared for a follow-on invasion by U.S. forces, coming out of both Afghanistan and Iraq. Those forces are not available at this point and would require several years to develop. That the United States could defeat and occupy Iran is certain. Whether the United States has a national interest in devoting the time and the resources to Iran's occupation is unclear.

The United States could have defeated North Vietnam with a greater mobilization of forces. However, Washington determined that the defeat of North Vietnam and the defense of Indochina were not worth the level of effort required. Instead, it tried to achieve its ends with the resources it was prepared to devote to the mission. As a result, resources were squandered and the North Vietnamese flag flies over what was Saigon.

The danger of war is that politicians and generals, desiring a particular end, fantasize that they can achieve that end with insufficient resources. This lesson is applicable to Iran.
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