

## "Completely Nuts"

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As the international confrontation over Iran's nuclear program gradually escalates, the Bush administration insists it is seeking a diplomatic solution even as it refuses to rule out the possibility of pre-emptive military strikes against Iran. President George W. Bush himself said last year, "I hope we can solve it diplomatically, but I will never take any option off the table."

One option he certainly should rule out is the use of nuclear weapons. As former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw recently commented, a pre-emptive nuclear strike on Iran's nuclear and leadership targets is "completely nuts," for several reasons.

The threat alone reduces the chance Tehran's leaders will respond positively to multilateral diplomacy designed to persuade them to halt Iran's uranium-enrichment program and accept more intrusive international inspections. A nuclear or conventional strike on Iran's nuclear complex would only delay Iran's nuclear program, enhance popular support for its radical leaders, and provide it with a rationale to pursue nuclear weapons openly. Worse still, it could inflict mass casualties, trigger a regional war involving exchanges of ballistic missiles, and prompt terrorist attacks against U.S. targets abroad and at home. Bush's foray into Iraq would become even more costly.

Iran has violated its nuclear [Nonproliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#) safeguards, but it says its program is solely for peaceful purposes and that it has a "right" under the NPT to pursue it. Although outsiders cannot be sure if Iran has made a strategic decision to acquire nuclear weapons, Tehran could have the capacity to mass-produce bomb-grade nuclear material within several years if it continues to improve and expand its enrichment facilities.

Since August, diplomatic efforts by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have broken down, and Iran has resumed enrichment and stopped certain inspections. European offers of access to foreign sources of nuclear fuel and economic integration could not overcome the prestige Iran now associates with nuclear technology and Tehran's concern about U.S.-led regime change intentions.

New U.S. diplomatic overtures are less likely to succeed so long as the threat of force, especially nuclear force, is held out as an option. Unfortunately, credible press reports indicate that the U.S. government is refining plans for conventional air strikes against some 400 key nuclear and leadership targets in Iran. These plans include contingencies for nuclear strikes using B61 Mod 11 bombs against Iran's major underground uranium-enrichment facilities.

The Bush administration is not the first to convey ambiguous nuclear threats against non-nuclear-weapon adversaries. When asked about the possible use of nuclear weapons against a Libyan chemical weapons installation in April 1996, a Clinton administration spokesperson said, "We would not foreclose any options for dealing with that threat."

Yet, Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi continued his pursuit of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons for several years. Only after quiet, direct engagement with U.S. and British officials and offers of normalized trade and diplomatic relations, an end to sanctions, and increased foreign investment did Libya agree in December 2003 to renounce its unconventional weapons. Without a public and direct threat of attack, Gaddafi could claim that he arrived at his decision "voluntarily."

Now, the Bush administration believes that if Tehran's leaders can be made to believe Bush is willing to attack, even with nuclear weapons, they will soften or reverse their position. Think again. Iran's

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hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said he is willing to hold talks over Tehran's disputed nuclear agenda but not with Israel or countries that hold "bombs over our head." His defiance has won him broader support in Iran.

The threat of force also makes it more difficult to win international support for a new package of incentives and disincentives that would give Iran a clear choice between the benefits of nuclear restraint and compliance or international financial and economic strangulation.

U.S. officials have sought a fresh UN Security Council resolution that would cite Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which could lead either to sanctions or the use of military force if Iran does not comply. With the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in mind, veto-wielding China and Russia want it to rule out the use of force. European officials have said they would not support a military attack.

A new and more comprehensive diplomatic push is needed. In exchange for the indefinite suspension of Iran's uranium-enrichment program and full cooperation with international inspections, the major powers should not only offer Iran guaranteed nuclear fuel supplies and trade benefits, but also normalized diplomatic relations and binding negative security guarantees as well.

Just as Iran should not necessarily exercise its "rights" under the NPT to enrich uranium, which could be used for weapons production, certain U.S. military options should not be considered, let alone pursued.

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