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Iran's Quest for Nuclear Weapon Status
American Debate on Pre-emptive Strike

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Abstract
In recent times, US policy towards Iran's nuclear ambition has become one of the most contested and hotly debated issues in the US and elsewhere. As the Bush administration ended with little tangible success in addressing the proliferation concerns involving Iran, the issue has come to haunt the Obama administration as well. The American strategic community largely agrees that Iran has the ambition to acquire nuclear weapon status and thus the debate revolves around how best to respond to it. Vigorous arguments have been paraded to assess the cost and benefits of a US pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear installations. Similar and equally vital deliberations abound in the strategic circles with respect to the option of an Israeli strike and its implication for US foreign policy. The article attempts to analyse this dynamic American debate at a critical juncture as President Obama, previously seen as the anti-thesis of the Bush era, seems to be facing the same sort of constraints that his predecessor was up against, while searching for a sound policy to deal with the Iranian conundrum.

Keywords
United States, Iran, military strike, nuclear programme

Introduction
One of the persistent agenda in world politics has been proliferation of nuclear weapons. This concern at various points of time brought together Cold War rivals and also divided trusted allies. Non-proliferation drive of the US during the Cold War faltered at the altar of national interest and Pakistan acquired the nuclear weapon capability. In the post-Cold War era, India went overtly nuclear in the face of Sino-Pakistan Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) collaborations and ineffectiveness of Washington's
responses. In the post-9/11 era, the US turned Pakistan into a major non-NATO ally and India into a strategic partner and established a new framework to forge civilian nuclear cooperation. But North Korea walked out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and detonated nuclear devices posing new challenges for the US. There were hectic diplomatic efforts to dissuade Pyongyang from going nuclear, but it failed to prevent proliferation in the Korean Peninsula.

In the mean time, Iran's nuclear activities drew world attention. Washington's concerns over Iran overshadowed the nuclearisation of North Korea. Iran's suspected quest for a nuclear weapon status in the midst of US military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan sparked hectic diplomatic efforts and implicit threat of use of force to prevent proliferation. The present article is a modest attempt to examine the American debate on military option to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The scope of the article is limited to various points of view aired by the members of the American strategic community in favour of military option to prevent proliferation. So far, no declared nuclear weapon power has resorted to force to stop or delay another country from going nuclear. But on one occasion, a widely assumed nuclear capable country did bomb the nuclear reactor of a neighbouring country—Israel's airstrike against the Iraqi Osirak nuclear reactor. So there is precedence. Can history be repeated?

Significantly, Iran persistently projects its desire to harness nuclear energy and nothing else. But Americans cutting across the political divide believe that Iran has nuclear weapon ambition. While there are Iranian efforts and policy that generate suspicion of Tehran's ultimate goal, there exists no clear evidence that Iran pursues a nuclear weapon programme. But the suspicion itself has led to an intense debate over acceptable options for the US.

In the midst of a global war on terrorism, the US intelligence agencies came up with the report that Iran was developing a clandestine nuclear weapon programme at least until 2003. Although this intelligence estimate was made public in 2007, Iran was believed to be at work to acquire a nuclear weapon capability when President George W. Bush characterised it as part of an 'axis-of-evil' in 2002. It was unnerving to the US policy makers to know about a second Islamic country seeking nuclear weapons, when Pakistan, the first Islamic country with nuclear weapons, was indirectly responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US.1 In addition, Iran by that time had survived the US-led political isolation and economic sanctions for decades since the 1979 Islamic revolution. When the Iranian regime considered the US as a 'Great Satan', President Bush dubbed Iran as part of an 'axis-of-evil'. Consequently, Washington's anxiety over what it believed to be Tehran's ambition to acquire nuclear weapons was explicable.

The 2007 US intelligence estimate suggested that Iran stopped the weapon programme in 2003. Did the US know this in 2003? Did it know only in 2007? It is unknown to the outside world. Significantly, the US invaded Iraq in 2003—the very year Iran supposedly halted its nuclear programme. One of the stated justifications of US invasion over Iraq was Saddam Hussein's suspected nuclear weapon programme. One may thus assume that Iran, according to the Bush administration's belief in 2003 itself, had already halted its weapons-related activities. If not, it could have contemplated an invasion of Iran as well. Was it possible that Iran halted its nuclear weapon activities in response to the Bush administration's plan to invade Iraq?

However, no intelligence analysis could produce any conclusive evidence to suggest that Iran was at work to develop nuclear weapons. But a series of Iranian activities came to the notice of the UN watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that led to suspicion that Iran might be having a secret programme to develop nuclear weapons. The overt steadfastness of the Ahmadinejad government to
build up a full cycle civilian nuclear programme further braced that suspicion. And the result was sparking of an unprecedented debate in the American political, academic and civil society circles about the best means to stop Iran from building up a nuclear infrastructure that would enable it to build nuclear bombs. The US inability to stop North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapon capability added new dimensions to the American debate. Detonation of a nuclear device by Pyongyang in 2006 intensified the American debate on the Iranian nuclear programme. Two other factors also shaped the American deliberations and established the seriousness of the Iranian nuclear question. One was the deteriorating situation in Iraq and the other was the difficulty in reigning in the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

There was apprehension in certain circles of the strategic community of the US that American difficulties in Iraq, Afghanistan and North Korea would bolster Tehran’s morale to more confidently pursue nuclear weapon capability. Thus, the Bush administration, backed by some members of the American strategic community, openly advocated a military option to bring to a standstill Iran’s nuclear programme. The argument in favour of a pre-emptive surgical strike against Iran’s nuclear installations rested on the condition that Iran refused to halt its uranium enrichment programme. The US and its allies appeared convinced that Iran’s nuclear quest was military oriented. While Iran adamantly projected its nuclear programme as strictly civilian in nature and highlighted its cooperation with the IAEA, the Western powers clearly thought otherwise.

Despite the 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) contradicting an earlier report of 2005 that asserted that Iran was determined to acquire nuclear weapon capability and said that Iran had halted its weapon programme in 2003, both the reports significantly did not refute the inherent ambition of the Iranian leadership to go for the nuclear bomb (Mahapatra 2009: 25). Many countries do recognise Iran’s right to develop civilian nuclear infrastructure, but they also point out that Iran should be more transparent in its nuclear programme and activities and fully cooperate with the requirements of the IAEA. The diplomatic pressure that President George Bush and his successor President Barack Obama exerted on Iran through the IAEA, UN Security Council and other fora, such as G-8, had wider support in the international community, but few could endorse the idea of possible military operations against Iran to check that country’s drive for a nuclear power status. The world watched as the Americans debated the military force as one of the options to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Persian Gulf.

Assessing Nuclear Threat from Iran

The American debate on Iran’s nuclear programme has divided the country’s strategic community not in terms of the intent of the Iranian nuclear programme but on the means the US should adopt to respond. There is a consensus among the foreign policy analysts that Tehran has an unmistakable nuclear weapon ambition. While Israeli nuclear arsenal does not disquiet the American policy makers, Iranian nuclear ambition does perturb them in view of the ongoing hostility between the two countries.

One of the most enduring hypotheses that have driven American foreign policy over the years has been its threat perceptions. How the US perceives a threat to its national security and its vital interests around the globe is one of the primary pillars on which American foreign policy is largely structured. The Soviet Union and its communist ideology were considered the paramount threat by the US policy makers during the entire Cold War period. But since the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, America’s threat perceptions have undergone a radical transformation. The enemies that America...
feels threatened from in the post-Cold War era are what are termed as ‘rogue states’, including Iran. In the post-9/11 era, America’s vexing problem has been the threat posed to the lives of American citizens at home and abroad and other American interests from non-state terrorist groups like the al-Qaeda. The deadlier combination would be a ‘rogue state’ with nuclear weapon capability having closer ties with terrorist organisations.

The terrorist networks are more diffused and often without a contact address, with no capital, with no distinct single nationality, but constituting only a band of powerful, hard-core anti-American fundamentalists out to avenge the ‘perceived’ threat that America in turn presents to the survival of their brethren and their faith. Now, how does one connect the dots and make sense of what kind of a threat an anti-Western Iran represents for the US. Successive US administrations have seen Iran for decades as a ‘rogue state’ that allegedly abrogates international law and disturbs the status quo in West Asia with its strategic ambitions. The professed threat from Iran has got heightened by the suspicion that Iran is intent on developing its own nuclear bomb in defiance of the laws that bind the signatories to the NPT, of which Iran continues to be a member.² Add to this the real-time American nightmare of WMD falling into the hands of terrorist groups out to destroy American lives and interests. Now if the dots are joined, the perceived picture is outright frightening to the US: a nuclear armed Iran which is anti-American, and one that supports anti-Western terrorist groups.

It was in the backdrop of all these developments that the doctrine of ‘pre-emption’ evolved during various stages of the Bush administration. The September 11 terrorist attacks generated a pervasive paranoia among wide sections of the American establishment and the American people. In response, President George Bush’s State of the Union Address in 2002 foreshadowed the contour of things to come:

Our nation will continue to be steadfast and patient and persistent in the pursuit of two great objectives. First, we will shut down terrorist camps, disrupt terrorist plans, and bring terrorists to justice. And, second, we must prevent the terrorists and regimes who seek chemical, biological or nuclear weapons from threatening the United States and the world... Our second goal is to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. (Bush 2002b, emphasis added)

Talking of Iran, Iraq and North Korea, President Bush proclaimed,

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic. (ibid.)

And then went on to warn:

And all nations should know: America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation’s security. We’ll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons. (ibid.)

For President Bush, Iran represented Islamic extremism, promoted anti-Western terrorism and cherished an interest to obtain nuclear weapon capability. Facing such threats by employing old strategies and
tactics of warfare would be difficult. Some more innovative measures would have to be taken. What would be such steps were made clearer when President Bush delivered the West Point Graduation Speech later the same year. Moving ahead to signal the increasing salience of pre-emption as a guiding principle against America’s new threats, he said:

For much of the last century, America’s defense relied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases, those strategies still apply. But new threats also require new thinking. Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizen to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies. [emphasis added]

.... If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long... We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act... And our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.... (Bush 2002a)

As the strategic community in the US and elsewhere began to discuss and debate the doctrine of ‘preemptive’ strike, the Bush administration persistently pressed ahead by adopting this doctrine as the official policy of the administration. The White House report, the National Security Strategy of the United States, 2002, stated:

We must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends.... Given the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past. The inability to deter a potential attacker, the immediacy of today’s threats, and the magnitude of potential harm that could be caused by our adversaries’ choice of weapons, do not permit that option. We cannot let our enemies strike first. (White House 2002b)

In a statement that seemed specifically designed for the Iranian threat, it said,

The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively. (ibid.)

The White House released yet another document in December 2002 on the National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction that succinctly stated, ‘...Because deterrence may not succeed and because of the potentially devastating consequences of WMD use against our forces and civilian population, U.S. military forces and appropriate civilian agencies must have the capability to defend against WMD-armed adversaries, including in appropriate cases through pre-emptive measures’ (White House 2002a).

Besides the official presentation of the ‘pre-emptive’ doctrine, several strategic analysts in the US too came up with support to the muscular approach of the Bush national security team. The wounds of
9/11 attacks, both physical and psychological, were fresh and could be discerned in the defence given to this approach. Tom Moriarty, a military intelligence analyst, for instance, argued that 'one of the most perplexing and dangerous' challenges to US national security came from 'the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to rogue regimes and terrorist groups'. He did not consider the terrorist strikes of September 11 as beginning of a new era of national security, but argued that while 'terrorism and WMD threats are not new to makers of US national security policy, the possibilities of the two threats combining have raised new levels of concern and fear about US security policy' (Moriarty 2004: 71).

While putting pressure on Iran to abandon its ambitious nuclear programme, especially the uranium enrichment efforts, Bush often warned that all options were on his table to tackle the Iranian nuclear issue—a not-so-veiled threat to use military force to end Iran's nuclear programme. The release of official documents stipulating the 'pre-emptive' doctrine also aimed at cautioning the Iranian leadership against their nuclear aspirations. Washington's perception of Iranian threat did not undergo any major change when Barack Obama succeeded President Bush in the White House. Despite repeated rhetoric of dialogue and diplomacy, President Barack Obama's desire to negotiate Iran out of the nuclear path produced little positive results.

The US State Department's 2009 Country Reports on Terrorism provided a glimpse of the official line under the Obama administration. It said:

Iran remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism. Iran's financial, material, and logistic support for terrorist and militant groups throughout the Middle East and Central Asia had a direct impact on international efforts to promote peace, threatened economic stability in the Gulf and undermined the growth of democracy. (US Department of State 2009)

Significantly, President Bush's intelligence chief, Michael Hayden, recently revealed that during his tenure a military strike was 'way down the list' of options, but observed that 'military action against Iran now seems more likely because no matter what the United States does diplomatically, Tehran keeps pushing ahead with its suspected nuclear program' (The Washington Times 2010).

Hayden's revelation indicates that deliberations on possible military strike against Iranian nuclear installations have yet again broken out reminiscent of the days of Bush in the White House. President Bush had a team of neoconservative advisors who prodded him to adopt a beefy route to protect and promote US interests. President Obama himself champions liberal internationalism and has so far refrained from threatening the use of force, but the strategic community in the US appears to be revisiting the issue. For example, Elliot Abrahams, well-known specialist on Middle Eastern affairs recently predicted that Obama would, by all accounts, suffer a tremendous political setback and could well be defeated in 2012 presidential election, should 'Iran acquire the Bomb in the next two years'. According to him, Republicans would have an even stronger case to argue that Obama weakened the country's national security. The Obama who would have struck Iran and destroyed its nuclear programme 'would be a far stronger candidate, and perhaps an unbeatable one' during the 2012 presidential campaign, wrote Abrahams (Abrahms 2010).

Max Boot, senior fellow in national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, is also of the opinion that:

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For all the empty talk of tough diplomacy, the uncomfortable reality is that there is only one option that in the short term is likely to forestall Iran from going nuclear; air strikes on its atomic installations. It is hardly an ideal solution, and, given how dispersed and protected Iran’s nuclear facilities are, not even a series of sorties is likely to eradicate that threat. But bombing could at least set back the Iranian program for a number of years, which is more than diplomacy is likely to accomplish. (Boot 2009)

Patrons of military option have been parading an array of arguments to back their preference, including emphasising the limits of deterrence, fear of surprise military strike by Israel, ineffectiveness of negotiation as tool of preventing proliferation, futility of sanctions and relevance of force to dissuade the headstrong regime from going nuclear.

Limitations of Deterrence

A new line of argument in support of pre-emptive strike has been trumpeted in the form of underlining the inherent imperfections of the doctrine of deterrence. According to some key analysts of the Iranian affairs, even though the risks of a preventive military strike are often unpalatable and daunting, the peril associated with deterrence is even more so. It has been argued that deterrence

[…] defers a crisis, but runs significant long-term risks. Some are incremental, such as more active Iranian support for terrorism, a resumption of efforts to export the revolution under the protection afforded by Iran’s nuclear umbrella, or a more assertive foreign policy, increasing the risk of conflict with its neighbours or the United States through miscalculation or recklessness. The most worrisome involves the possibility of a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions.3 (Clawson and Eisenstadt 2008: 17)

Frederick Kagan, another specialist of nuclear issues, has claimed that “there is no way to stop the Islamic Republic from acquiring such weapons. It may be that the price of attempting to do so is too high. It does not follow, however, that the world can be comfortable with the prospect of a nuclear Iran because it can be deterred” (Kagan 2010). Evan Braden Montgomery similarly contends that

[Det]errence along with containment seems to be emerging as the default option for dealing with a nuclear-armed Iran in the future but he cautioned that this strategy might not work as well as it did between adversaries during the Cold War, when the U.S. had formal treaty arrangements with allies and hundreds of thousands of troops in Western Europe to deter a Soviet attack. Montgomery believes that such an arrangement would be impossible to replicate between the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East today. (Voice of America 2011)

Negotiations Won’t Work

While some enthusiasts of military option publicise the weakness of deterrence, others emphasise the inadequacies of negotiations as a tool to dissuade Iran from opting for the nuclear option. According to Patrick Clawson, ‘at the end, diplomacy may not be enough’. He agrees with the former IAEA Director
General Mohamed El Baradei who believes that diplomacy ‘has to be backed by pressure and, in extreme cases, by force. We have rules. We have to do everything possible to uphold the rules through conviction. If not, then you impose them. Of course, this has to be the last resort, but sometimes you have to do it’ (Clawson 2006).

Martin Indyk, on the other hand, has underlined the illusiveness of negotiating with Iran. In a testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Indyk has remarked:

Secretary of State Rice’s offer to engage in direct negotiations with the government of Iran, if it suspends uranium enrichment, and recent hints from chief negotiator Ali Larijani that Iran might be prepared to do so, create a false ray of hope for diplomacy ... Many fear that the Iranians are engaged in a game of ‘rope-a-dope’, absorbing our best efforts to stop their nuclear program while buying time to get themselves over the nuclear know-how threshold. For these people, many of them in influential positions, the offer of negotiations is a necessary evil to demonstrate that the U.S. has exhausted diplomacy before it resorts to a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities (Indyk 2006)

Columnist Charles Krauthammer has held a strong view that the Europeans had wasted time by hoping that open diplomacy would work, while the Iranians took advantage of the time provided ‘to harden its nuclear facilities against bombardment, acquire new antiaircraft capacities and clandestinely advance its program ... we now have to deal with a set of fanatical Islamists who we know will not be deterred from pursuing nuclear weapons by any sanctions’ (Krauthammer 2006).

**Questionable Usefulness of Sanctions**

Advocates of military option to counter proliferation risks have also been in the forefront of questioning the viability of sanctions as the appropriate tool. Can sanctions compel the Iranians to forego their nuclear ambitions? Suzanne Maloney points out that unilateral nature of American sanctions and Tehran’s successful countermeasures to mitigate the effects of sanctions have produced no rewarding results. While Iran has steadily expanded its network of economic ties with multiple countries, defections from sanctions regime and intentional non-compliance by other countries have rendered the US-led sanctions unproductive (Maloney 2010: 140). John R. Bolton seems convinced that ‘strong sanctions’ would not be able to thwart Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, mainly because ‘the usual suspects like China and Russia’ would not extend genuine cooperation and the resolve of the European Union and Japan would not be enough. He believes that adopting ‘tougher economic sanctions is simply another detour away from hard decisions on whether to accept a nuclear Iran or support using force to prevent it’ (Bolton 2009a).

Other analysts have tried to substantiate the position that sanctions have never satisfactorily worked in the history of nuclear non-proliferation. According to David Sanger, ‘Sanctions are a tempting tool for any president. They impose more pain than doing nothing or issuing ritual diplomatic condemnations, and they stop well short of military confrontation. Unfortunately, when it comes to stopping countries from getting the bomb, history suggests they are rarely effective’ (Sanger 2010).
Force: The Best Option

If 'fanatical Islamists' cannot be deterred by sanctions, what else can be done except opting for the use of force to stop the Iranian nuclear programme? Several other analysts and pundits actually deem the military option as the best option to put a stop to Iran's nuclear dream. These analysts are not opposed to negotiations, sanctions, regime change and other options, but consider these alternatives fruitless without the threat of use of force or actual employment of force.

American political analyst William Kristol, for instance, has branded the peace-loving doves as 'escapists' and maintains that even if 'military action won't ultimately be necessary', 'the only way diplomatic, political and economic pressure has a chance to work over the next months is if the military option—or various military options—are kept on the table'. According to him, the US support to diplomatic, political, economic and other measures would succeed only when the US would hold 'open the possibility of, and beginning to prepare for, various forms of military action' (Kristol 2006).

Kristol and others are of the view that Iran has managed to buy time for its nuclear programme while the Western countries pursued diplomacy and toothless sanctions. They contend that the steps adopted to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue should bear results, in the absence of which a tougher stance needs to be adopted by the US (Wright 2007). Iran's significant progress in its nuclear programme might enable it to resume activities even if there is a hiatus today. Thus, the set of sticks used to threaten Iran must be the ones that can be reliable and trustworthy for years to come (Byman 2007). According to these analysts, no better option exists than to surgically strike the nuclear sites by the US, Israel or by a 'coalition of the willing'.

It is increasingly becoming clear in recent times that military option is little by little returning to the table of the Obama administration. Key administration officials, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the CIA Director Leon Panetta, have been contemplating on the salience of a military option to derail Iran's nuclear activities. Defense Secretary Gates told the Fox News on 20 June 2010: 'We do not accept the idea of Iran having nuclear weapons', and Panetta told ABC News a week later that sanctions would not deter Iranian nuclear efforts (Klein 2010).

The US media in early months of 2010 was rife with guess-works about the prospect of either a US or an Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Significantly, former CIA Director Michael Hayden made an observation about a gradual drift of opinion towards military option to deal sternly with Iran's nuclear aspiration, while Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen divulged that the US military had 'drawn up plans to attack the Islamic Republic' (Eisenstadt and Crist 2010).

Stunning Israeli Air Strike

Even if sections of private opinion makers endeavour to project military option as the best option, the administration may not get attracted to this idea. Yet another way of convincing the administration and liberal public opinion to take military measures to counter prospective proliferation efforts by Tehran would be to draw attention to probability of an unexpected Israeli military strike.
It has been argued by some that if the US remained a silent bystander, the Israelis might take the first
step and complicate matters for the US. Jeffrey Goldberg's article in the Atlantic precisely surmises that
Israel would launch an attack on Iran's nuclear installations in case the US fails to do something effect-
ively to stop the Iranian march towards a nuclear weapon status. The article almost amounts to poking
the Obama administration to make the military route against Iran, presenting an apocalyptic scenario of
the Iranian nuclear threat through the eyes of Israeli strategic thinkers. Goldberg reminds that Israel has
successfully destroyed the Iraqi reactor at Osirak, a North Korean-built reactor in Syria and could do it
once again (Goldberg 2010).

Reuel Marc Gerecht too considers an Israeli military punch against Iranian nuclear facilities feasible
and points out: 'There is only one thing that terrifies Washington's foreign policy establishment more
than the prospect of an American airstrike against Iran's nuclear-weapons facilities: an Israeli airstrike.
Left, right, and center, "sensible" people view the idea with alarm.' That means the author wants
Washington to do something before Tel Aviv takes the drastic step. Gerecht argues that 'assuming no
U.S. military action, an Israeli bombardment remains the only conceivable means of derailing or seriously
delaying Iran's nuclear program and—equally important—traumatizing Tehran' (Gerecht 2010).

Moreover, John Bolton, former US Ambassador to the United Nations, circuitously cautions of an
Israeli airstrike against Iran's nuclear facilities, unless the US does something. He finds fault with
Obama's game plan and says,

Since there is no likelihood that diplomacy will start or finish in time, or even progress far enough to make any
real difference, there is no point waiting for negotiations to play out. In fact, given the near certainty of Obama
changing his definition of "success", negotiations represent an even more dangerous trap for Israel. (Bolton
2009b)

Gary Anderson's version is more fear-provoking than by others. He presages:

When the Israelis go after the Iranians, the United States will get blamed in the Muslim world no matter what
we do to dissuade the Israelis. No argument will convince the professional America haters, who set the narrative
on the Muslim street, that we didn't put the Israelis up to it, so why try? If it is going to happen, we should give
serious consideration to helping the Israelis get it right. (Anderson 2011)

On the other hand, columnist Judson Berger raises a question: '...Which is more dangerous—an Iran
capable of launching a nuclear weapon? Or an Iran that just got hit with tons of artillery and is out for
revenge?', but claims that 'the thought of military action is not far-fetched. The United States acknowledges
it possesses an attack plan for Iran, and the Israelis reportedly have drawn up specific scenarios for a
strike' (Berger 2010).

Noted analyst Bruce Riedel in addition seems convinced that:

[Military operation to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is well under way in Israel... Though Israel
is giving diplomacy and sanctions time to change Iranian behavior, few in Jerusalem expect the soft approach
to work. Most also doubt the United States will use force. [But he added] An Israeli attack on Iran is a disaster
in the making. And it will directly impact key strategic American interests. Iran will see an attack as American
supported if not American orchestrated. (Riedel 2010)

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Contesting the Military Option

Notwithstanding powerful arguments in favour of employing military force to prevent suspected and potential proliferation of nuclear weapons in Iran, some voices have reminded the limitations of this strategy. They contest the prudence of resorting to use of force against a nuclear programme that is not explicitly weapon oriented and question the credibility of this option in truly ending Iran’s perceived drive towards acquiring a nuclear weapon capability.

Various reasons have been put forward by them to show the drawbacks, hazards and unattractiveness of the military option to stop the perceived Iranian drive towards a nuclear weapon capability. Bruce Riedel has forcefully argued against the military option in view of its long-term negative consequences (Riedel 2010). Graham Allison, for example, has cautioned that the fiasco of the Bush administration to prove its allegation against Saddam Hussein’s determination to acquire nuclear weapons would weaken any future effort by the US to mount a campaign against Iran’s nuclear weapon programme. He says, ‘The Bush administration used the danger that Saddam might supply WMD to terrorists as its decisive argument for war. The subsequent failure to find evidence of these weapons has compromised the administration’s credibility on the general subject of WMD, as well as the perceived competence of the U.S. intelligence community’ (Allison 2004: 68). Can the Obama administration now convince others about the need for military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, unless it is able to produce conclusive evidence of Iran’s activities to that effect?

Michael Eisenstadt has reasoned that

Preventive action will not stop a determined proliferator as far advanced as Iran, though it could cause delays. The principal goal of U.S. action would be to delay Iran’s nuclear program long enough to allow for the possible emergence of new leadership in Tehran that will be willing to eschew nuclear weapons (which seems improbable) or that is more likely to act responsibly should it obtain such weapons. (Eisenstadt 2003)

Elaborating on the intelligence, technical and political challenges involved with a US preventive action or even an Israeli strike (that will be seen instantly as inspired by Washington), he wrote,

Successful U.S. prevention would require exceptionally complete intelligence; near flawless military execution; and deft poststrike diplomacy to mitigate nationalist/anti-American backlash, deter retaliation and, most important, catalyze political change in Iran. The complex, daunting, and somewhat contradictory nature of these challenges (e.g., successful prevention could harm short-term prospects for political change and complicate long-term prospects for rapprochement with a new Iran) only underscores the importance of exhausting diplomatic options before giving serious consideration to military action. (Eisenstadt 2003)

Sammy Salama and Karen Ruster are of the view that any attempt to replay the Osirak in Iran would simply fail, since ‘Natanz, Bushehr, and Arak are much farther away from Israel than Osirak. Moreover, these facilities are located hundreds of miles from each other, which make them more difficult to attack simultaneously’ (Salama and Ruster 2004). Moriarty has analysed how Israeli attack on Osirak was counterproductive. He writes:

Quite the contrary, after Osirak was destroyed, Iraq intensified its efforts to develop nuclear weapons by dispersing its nuclear research and production facilities, heavily fortifying all nuclear-related facilities, and making

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redundant nuclear facilities throughout the country so that the destruction of one or two targets did not destroy the entire program. (Moriarty 2004: 73)

He similarly points out that

[It] would not be possible to attack a single target in Iran and cause any significant amount of harm to Iran’s WMD program. To destroy or, at the very least, cause significant damage to Iran’s WMD program, one would have to attack multiple targets located throughout Iran. If a country attacked all of these targets, the possibilities that all targets would be destroyed and collateral damage limited are not promising. Furthermore, by striking so many targets throughout Iran, there would be very little chance that Iran would not respond with military force. Hence, the prospects of a successful preemptive attack are not encouraging. (Moriarty 2004: 75–76)

Others speak of the retaliatory capacity of Iran. Scott Sagan notes that

Even if U.S. intelligence services were confident that they had identified all major nuclear-related sites in Iran (they are not) and the Pentagon could hit all the targets, the United States would expose itself (especially its bases in the Middle East and U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq), and its allies, to the possibility of severe retaliation. (Sagan 2006: 54)

He also has warned that ‘Muslim sentiment throughout the world would be all the more inflamed, encouraging terrorist responses against the West’ (ibid.: 54–55).

Only Military Strike not Enough

A survey of the American opinions on Iran’s nuclear activities clearly indicates that sanctions, negotiations, political pressure and even military strikes may not be able to achieve the desired goal—which is keeping Iran away from weapon capability. The liberal internationalists would prefer civilian tools of diplomacy and dialogue or economic sanctions and political isolation as punitive instruments to deal with the proliferation issue. The neconservatives would go in for employment of hard military force to prevent Iran from going nuclear. But there seem to be another option that would combine liberal internationalism with neconservatism.

These analysts explain that neither diplomacy nor war alone offers the best solution. Diplomacy needs backing of military preparedness and the naked military option without economic and political instruments of statecraft cannot achieve the acceptable outcome. Complications also arise when the policy makers have to choose the degree and extent of diplomacy or/and force to be employed. Where does one draw line to end diplomacy and begin military action? Can threat of use of force allow diplomacy to work? Or, threats can increase trust deficit and result in failed diplomacy? A few scholars and analysts have prescribed a complex menu of means on this issue.

According to Clawson, pre-emption of Iran’s nuclear programme may be necessary,

[...] but in that case, deterrence and containment will be needed to limit Iranian reactions after the preemption. Because almost any policy option will entail deterrence and containment as an element, the United States should increase its actions to deter and contain Iran without waiting for further diplomatic developments. (Clawson 2006)
A 2008 report from an independent task force sponsored by the Bipartisan Policy Centre says:

Too often, the public, diplomats, and many policymakers equate military options with bombing or invasion, but these are only the last resort. A military component underlies both deterrence and containment. Indeed, both these options require robust planning and military presence. Non-military policies would be expected to buttress the military option through the ‘DIME’ paradigm—Diplomatic, Military, Informational, and Economic. Such an integrated approach can reduce the potential need to employ actual military force by convincing Iran that any such confrontation would be counter-productive, and that it faces determined international and regional solidarity against Tehran. Diplomacy would come into play in paving the way for a credible deterrent and to build the capacity needed to actually carry out military action, if needed. (Bipartisan Policy Centre 2008)

James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh argue:

Current efforts to limit Iran’s nuclear program must be pursued with vigor. Economic pressure on Tehran must be maintained. Military options to prevent Iran from going nuclear must not be taken off the table. But these steps may not be enough. If Iran’s recalcitrant mullahs cross the nuclear threshold, the challenge for the United States will be to make sure that an abhorrent outcome does not become a catastrophic one. This will require understanding how a nuclear Iran is likely to behave, how its neighbors are likely to respond, and what Washington can do to shape the perceptions and actions of all these players. (Lindsay and Takeyh 2010)

Concluding Observations

Those who support military action are clearly not sure, if it would end Iran’s nuclear programme for ever. Those who oppose military action and rely heavily upon sanctions as the legitimate tool to influence Iranian behaviour are perhaps already disappointed over the outcome. A former CIA analyst Rolf Mowat-Larsen has lamented that the ‘sanctions as configured now are not going to have any appreciable impact on Iran.... And the reality is that there isn’t a more viable military option’ (Sanger 2010).

Talking about the UN sponsored fourth round of sanctions in 2010, Mike Shuster said,

The United States wanted much tougher sanctions from the U.N. Security Council, sanctions that would really bite against Iran, and China did not want that, and Russia to a lesser extent. And so the U.N. Security Council imposed a fourth round of sanctions on Iran, but they are still relatively mild and it’s not at all clear that they will be decisive in changing Iran’s behavior vis-à-vis its nuclear activities.... If sanctions don’t work there will be, again, much discussion about military action to take out some of their nuclear facilities. The Obama administration clearly does not want to do that. And so ultimately if Iran’s behavior isn’t changed by sanctions vis-à-vis its nuclear activities, the issue of containment and deterrence comes up later on down the road. (Shuster 2010)

The campaign against Iranian nuclear programme appears to have come to a dead end. Sanctions have not worked and military option is unlikely to succeed. Is the Obama administration moving towards living with yet another nuclear weapon power? The US has confronted in very many ways two nuclear weapon powers at various points of time—the former Soviet Union and China. Russia is no longer a national security threat to the US and China has become one of the largest economic partners. Differences on key issues between the two countries notwithstanding, the Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine

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squarely applies, though informally, to US–China relations in the twenty-first century. Washington has happily co-existed and made common cause with two other nuclear weapon powers—Britain and France. It does not feel threatened by two de facto nuclear weapon powers—India and Israel. Pakistan has been turned into a major non-NATO ally. Will the US manage a nuclear Iran, as and when it emerges? Even if it does, the problem does not end there. Policy makers in the US are already thinking about the next set of questions related to nuclear proliferation. If Iran gets its bomb, will Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey remain far off from a nuclear quest?

Notes
1. It was Pakistan that created the Taliban; which gave safe shelters to al-Qaeda—the organisation mainly responsible for the terrorist onslaught on the US.
2. On 14 August 2002, at the Willard Hotel, just a few blocks away from Foggy Bottom, a US-educated Iranian citizen, Alireza Jafarzadeh, the chief congressional liaison and media spokesperson for the US representative office of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) revealed to the international community the highly secretive Iranian nuclear activities by providing information about nuclear sites at Natanz (uranium enrichment) and Arak (heavy water production). See Ritter (2006).
3. ‘Deterring a nuclear-armed Iran is likely to prove much more difficult than deterring the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. The international community is not likely to have the political will to build and maintain a broad coalition of states to deter a nuclear Iran over a period of decades’, they have argued (Clawson and Eisenstadt 2008).
5. ‘Washington swore for years it would stop India and Pakistan from joining the nuclear club and briefly turned off aid to them. Today it works secretly with Pakistan to secure its arsenal and has signed a treaty with India permitting it to buy nuclear material. North Korea has been under sanctions for years and is broke to boot; that did not stop it from conducting two crude nuclear tests. While some countries have been persuaded to give up their weapons or weapons dreams—South Africa, Libya, South Korea among them—the conditions were radically different than they are in the case of Iran’, Sanger has remarked (Sanger 2010).

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