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The World

Why Not a Strike on Iran?

By [DAVID E. SANGER](#)
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DIPLOMATS around the world keep repeating the mantra: There is no military option when it comes to slowing, much less stopping, [Iran's](#) presumed ambitions to get the Bomb. The Europeans say so. The Chinese, who need Iran's oil, and the Russians, who make billions supplying Iran's civilian nuclear business, say so emphatically.

Even the hawks in the Bush administration make no threats. When Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) was asked Thursday, in a television interview, if the United States might ever resort to force to stop Iran, he handled the question as if it, too, were radioactive.

"No president should ever take the military option off the table," he said, carefully avoiding the kind of language he once used to warn [Saddam Hussein](#). "Let's leave it there."

Mr. Cheney, it seemed, was trying to sow just enough ambiguity to make Iran think twice. Which raises two questions. If diplomacy fails, does America have a military option? And what if it doesn't?

"It's a kind of nonsense statement to say there is no military solution to this," said W. Patrick Lang, the former head of Middle East intelligence at the Defense Intelligence Agency. "It may not be a desirable solution, but there is a military solution."

Mr. Lang was piercing to the heart of a conundrum the Bush administration recognizes: Iran could become a case study for pre-emptive military action against a gathering threat, under a policy Mr. Bush promulgated in 2002. But even if taking out Iran's facilities delay the day the country goes nuclear, it would alienate allies and probably make firm enemies out of many Iranians who have come to dislike their theocratic government. And Iran simply has too many ways of striking back, in the oil markets, in the Persian Gulf, through Hezbollah.

"Could we do it?" one administration official who was deeply involved in planning the Iraq invasion said recently. "Sure. Could we manage the aftermath? I doubt it."

Similar fears, he said, gave President [Bill Clinton](#) pause about launching a strike on North Korea in 1994. Later that year he reached an accord for a freeze on the North's nuclear production facilities. But in 2003 everything unfroze, and now the North, by C.I.A. estimates, has enough fuel for at least half a dozen bombs.

The Iranians took careful notes then, and here in Washington today the Korean experience underlies diplomacy-versus-force arguments that rarely take place on the record.

The problem is not that Washington lacks targets. Many of Iran's nuclear facilities, or at least those that American intelligence agencies know about, are in plain view or in underground sites whose construction was recorded by spy satellites. The problem is the global consequences of an attack to cripple them.

"The irony is that this is the opposite of Iraq," said John J. Hamre, a deputy defense secretary from 1997 to 1999. "We know a lot about what they have because the international inspectors have been there." Those inspection reports have helped Pentagon planners who, in imagining every contingency, have already mapped out Iran's most vulnerable facilities.

"Elimination of the nuclear program is not possible, but with the right strikes you could decisively set them back," said Ashton B. Carter, an expert at Harvard on proliferation problems.

In Iran's case, any attack would almost certainly start at Natanz, where Iran clipped off the International Atomic Energy Agency's seals a week ago and said it was preparing to reassemble a connected series of 164 centrifuges for purifying uranium.

Just beyond the research laboratories is a huge underground chamber, designed to hold as many as 50,000 centrifuges, yet unbuilt. Iran hid its existence for years.

Also on the target list, officials said, would be factories that manufacture the centrifuge components, and a plant at Isfahan where raw uranium is converted into a form that can be fed into the centrifuges.

Then there are research centers and military installations where the United States suspects - but cannot prove - that clandestine nuclear-related activity may be taking place. Given the track record in Iraq, however, there is always the risk that those facilities will turn out to be a watch factory, or, worse, a schoolhouse. (The Iranians hid one facility behind a false wall in a Tehran factory, but the I.A.E.A. found it.)

"You are talking about something in the neighborhood of a thousand strike sorties," said Mr. Lang. "And it would take all kinds of stuff - air, cruise missiles, multiple restrikes - to make sure you've got it all." Other former officials say fewer bombing runs would be needed.

The Israelis, who see Iran's nuclear program as a threat to their existence and have been far more outspoken about a military option, give a similar assessment. But they also say they lack the air power, or the reach, to do the job.

In any event, it is one thing to talk about such strikes in purely military terms, and another to consider the political cost.

"What you do with a bombing campaign is bring a whole country rallying around its radical leaders," said Mr. Hamre. "And that's the opposite of what we are trying to achieve in Iran,"

which is to convince a well-traveled, well-educated, and in some cases pro-American population to usher in a very different kind of leadership.

But if Iran knows the United States and its allies ultimately have no stomach to put military muscle behind their demands, what is its incentive to give up its weapons program? Efforts by the Europeans and Russia to come up with formulas that would provide Iran with nuclear material that cannot be used for weapons have been rejected, at least so far. And no one wants to threaten truly tough sanctions, for fear that by hurting ordinary Iranians they will only drive moderates into the camp of their leaders. Those leaders have been threatening retaliation, even to measures as weak as a letter of warning from the United Nations Security Council.

They have threatened to cut off oil exports and send the markets into a panic, though most experts said an embargo is not something Iran could execute for very long without damaging its own economy. Iran could also step up interference in Iraq and dispatch Hezbollah on terror missions. In addition, the Iranians often boast that their missiles can reach Israel.

Some of those threats may be inflated. And for now, at least, Iran's centrifuge program appears to have hit some technical hitches. I.A.E.A. inspectors are still in Iran, and the Iranians have not yet dared throw them out, as the North Koreans did three years ago. A senior European diplomat involved in the talks with Iran dismissed most of the country's threats last week as "bluster meant to buy them some time, and keep us paralyzed."

But, he added, "it may work."

Several American officials, when promised anonymity, said they thought that in 5 or 10 years, Iran will most likely have a weapon.

"They have read us pretty well," Mr. Hamre said. "They have skated right at the edge of controlled pugnaciousness."

The debate among the West, Russia and China is whether, together, they are willing to skate to the same edge in hopes that, in a repeat of the cold war, the other side blinks first.