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Serious Play: War Games Explore Options on Iran

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What if Iran's hardline leadership emerges from the current confrontations at home strengthened and emboldened? If so, the nuclear issue will be back with a vengeance. And three recent war games focused on the Iranian nuclear weapons issue suggest that the prospects for halting the regime's progress toward nuclear weapons are not good.

The games -- conducted by highly respected Western think tanks -- explored various strategies for preventing the Iranian nuclear threat from becoming real. The results, unfortunately, were uniformly negative. Given that these were serious games played by serious people, officials who deal with the nuclear problem as a matter of real policy would be wise to seriously consider their implications.

Purpose and Utility of War Games

Games are strategic planning tools that have proven especially useful in international conflict situations. A war game begins with a defined scenario and evolves through a series of actions to a final situation or outcome. Individuals or teams simulate key decisions by national leaders in a role-playing environment. Meanwhile, an objective, independent team acts as a referee, setting up the initial scenario and adjudicating the play turn by turn. The result is not a prediction of the future but rather a plausible, perhaps even likely, outcome that can be of great value in planning and forecasting.

Wargaming is an alternative to the standard paper assessments fashioned by subject-matter experts, and its unique characteristics convey certain advantages. Games can be highly effective at emulating the dynamic and competitive nature of real-world situations. They also replicate the uncertainty (misunderstanding, miscommunication, misperception, and misrepresentation) that characterizes actual situations. In addition, the compelling and immersive nature of war games often leads to revelatory moments for the participants. All in all, the process of testing complex strategies and decisions in a competitive human gaming environment may be the best we can do short of the real world.

Some caveats are in order. This article is based on limited reporting and data regarding the three games, and certain elements of game play may therefore be missing. Nevertheless, drawing some conclusions from the available information is useful given the important and pressing nature of the Iran nuclear issue.

Iran Games

In December 2009, experts at Harvard University, Tel Aviv University, and the Brookings Institution conducted three separate war games to analyze various Iranian nuclear scenarios. In each, players were organized into teams representing the key countries and leaders. The participants were drawn from a mix of former senior civilian and military policymakers as well as regional subject-matter experts (e.g., academics, analysts, journalists).

The Harvard war game. Organized by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's

Kennedy School of Government, this game explored how the confrontation over Iran's nuclear program might evolve in the coming year. Reported results included:

- The United States could not get any meaningful support for sanctions.
- Russia and China -- both of which will be key players if sanctions are to work -- conducted secret negotiations with Iran.
- The U.S.-Israeli relationship deteriorated dramatically during the game, leading to a deep diplomatic crisis.
- Iran saw itself in a strong position and played accordingly.
- Iran emerged better off at the end of the game than it had been at the beginning. By December 2010, it had doubled its supply of low-enriched uranium and was proceeding to weaponization.

According to one participant, Iran "never felt seriously threatened" and could "win" the game easily. Indeed, most observers would probably characterize the outcome as a win for Iran and a defeat for the United States and Israel.

The Tel Aviv war game. Organized by the Institute for National Security Studies, the Tel Aviv simulation explored U.S.-Iranian nuclear negotiations and potential Israeli responses. Reported results included:

- Iran assumed a strong position in the game based on a clear objective: obtaining nuclear weapons.
- Israel and the United States lacked clear goals and strategies for dealing with Iran's program.
- The Iranians saw the United States as weak and indecisive but viewed their own position as strong.
- Israel was perceived as being unhelpful to the United States.
- At game's end, Iran continued its nuclear program, neither persuaded nor deterred.

The Brookings war game. Conducted at the institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy in Washington, D.C., this game explored how Israel, Iran, and the United States might respond to an Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Reported results included:

- The United States was unhappy with Israel over the attack.
- The United States tried to talk tough with Iran but also sought direct negotiations.
- The United States attempted to stay out of the conflict.
- The U.S. response was limited and defensive.
- Iran interpreted U.S. behavior as weak and was emboldened by this perception.

Importance of Multiple Games

Based on available information, the games seemed to be well done -- they added to the insights obtained through standard analytical methods, and more such games would appear to be in order. Any one of them would have been worthwhile on their own, but taken together they are even more valuable. Using similar issues and agents, they yielded some of the same negative outcomes:

- The United States did not obtain meaningful cooperation from other countries.
- Sanctions did not seem to work.
- The United States was unwilling to use military force or support Israeli military action even after other measures failed.
- U.S.-Israeli relations deteriorated dramatically.
- Iran continued toward a nuclear weapons capability.

Insights

The games provide several insights into why the Iranian nuclear problem is so intractable and how it might develop in the near to mid term. Iran "won" the games at least in part because it had a strong hand, coherent strategy, clear goals, and determined leadership. In contrast, it faced an array of opponents who were divided on objectives and strategies and who exhibited uncertain, if not vacillating, leadership. Among these opponents, only Israel was willing to use military force, while the United States appeared to play its hand weakly in all three simulations.

The games also indicated that, as the nuclear issue escalates, dealing with Israel could become as big a challenge for the United States as dealing with Iran, at least in some ways. U.S. and Israeli threat perceptions, goals, and strategies diverged in the face of Iranian progress toward nuclear weapons. The United States eschewed military action to avoid the attendant risks, while Israel was more willing to take the risks to avoid, or at least postpone, the nuclear threat. Game play suggests that an eventual U.S.-Israeli crisis is likely.

Conclusions

All three games have the ring of truth: they are plausible, credible, and consistent, and they reinforce other analyses suggesting that diplomacy and sanctions will not work. This leads to certain conclusions.

First, the United States must "play" differently in the coming months than the participants who represented it in these simulations. Current U.S. policy seemed to fail in each game, leaving the situation worse in several dimensions: Iran was undeterred (even strengthened), relations with Israel were in crisis, and international support was lacking. Accordingly, the United States and others must conceive and develop new, more robust initiatives (e.g., strong support for regime change).

Second, the United States must plan for military action, either by itself, with others, or in the wake of unilateral Israeli strikes. Both the military and the public should be prepared for the consequences of these scenarios. These preparations must be carried out with the full understanding that the military option is practicable -- and, at the end of the day, may well be the required course of action.

Third, the results of these games are likely disturbing for Israel, indicating that its leaders should prepare both diplomatically and militarily to go it alone. A decision to strike could be the most fateful since the state's founding. Israel needs to ready its military not just for a raid or operation, but also for an extended war on multiple fronts and deep within the homeland. Likewise, the civilian population should prepare itself for the disruption and casualties of such a conflict. Israel already appears to be moving in this direction, and that course seems wise given the outcome of the war games. Time is running out.

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