

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Two Neglected Issues in the "Bomb Iran" Debate

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With only a few exceptions, there was little developed critical discussion in the runup to the anti-proliferation war against Iraq. By contrast, due in considerable part to the subsequent disastrous experience in that enterprise, a fairly healthy debate is now taking place about the wisdom and consequences of launching a Pearl Harbor-like military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Even at that, there are at least two areas that should be more fully considered in this discussion.

One has been deftly put forward in an essay on the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* website by Jacques Hymans. It is developed from his terrific new book, *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians and Proliferation* which has just been published by Cambridge University Press. The book and the essay examine a central conundrum: Why have so many determined countries had so much difficulty producing a nuclear weapon and why have generations of prognosticators consequently been so wrong about the likely pace of proliferation? One example of error among a very great many: it is now nearly two years since Doyle McManus informed us in the *Los Angeles Times* that "most experts now estimate that Iran needs about 18 months to complete a nuclear device and a missile to carry it."

McManus stressed that Iran needed to overcome “technical bottlenecks, the exposure of secret facilities and equipment breakdowns.” Hymans, unlike the “experts” McManus consulted, goes much deeper, stressing the administrative difficulties of developing a bomb. These require “the full-hearted cooperation of thousands of scientific and technical workers for many years.” The task is “enormous,” and

the key driver of an efficient nuclear weapons project has not been a country's funding levels, political will, or access to hardware. Rather, the key has been managerial competence. Nuclear weapons projects require a hands-off, facilitative management approach, one that permits scientific and technical professionals to exercise their vocation. But states such as Iran tend to feature a highly invasive, authoritarian management approach that smothers scientific and technical professionalism. Thus, it is very likely that Iran's political leadership—with its strong tendency toward invasive, authoritarian mismanagement—has been its own worst enemy in its quest for the bomb.

The other consideration comes from my own work as developed in my [book](#), *Atomic Obsession*, and as summarized for the Iran case in a recent [post](#) on the *Guardian* website.

The argument in its very basic form is that it really doesn't bloody well *matter* whether Iran gets the bomb or not.

Although we have now suffered through two-thirds of a century during which there has been a near-infinite amount of hysteria about the disasters inherent in nuclear proliferation, the substantive consequences of proliferation have been minimal. Although the weapons have certainly affected military spending, diplomatic posturing, and ingenious theorizing they have had little substantial impact on history since 1945.

Those few countries that have taken the plunge have failed to find a plausible military use for the expensive trinkets. And even the deterrence value of the weapons has been questionable—the major Cold War participants, for example, scarcely needed visions of mushroom clouds to conclude that any replication of World War II, with or without nuclear weapons, was a decidedly bad idea.

For the most part, the few countries that have acquired the weapons have found them a notable waste of time, money, effort, and scientific talent. They have quietly kept them in storage, and haven't even found much benefit in rattling them from time to time.

This was the experience even with the ultimate rogue state, Communist China in the 1960s. John Kennedy reportedly considered a Chinese nuclear test "likely to be historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s." Actually, that designation should probably go instead to Kennedy's decision to send American troops in substantial numbers to Vietnam largely to confront the Chinese "threat" that lurked there.

The Obama administration is notable for the apparent absence of anybody in a high foreign policy office who clearly and publicly opposed the war on Iraq before George W. Bush launched his invasion. Maybe things are less heated on the Iran issue, but the bottom line hasn't changed, certainly not at the top.

It was in the campaign of 2008, for example, that candidate Barack Obama repeatedly announced that he would "do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon—everything," even as candidate Hillary Clinton insisted that Iran must be kept from getting the bomb "at all costs."

Neither bothered to tally what "everything" might entail and what the costs might be, and both continue to make the same kind of pronouncements. But since the anti-proliferation military effort in Iraq has led to the deaths of more people than perished at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined, perhaps it is time to consider the wisdom of policies carried out under the obsessive sway of worst case scenario fantasies.