Matthew Kroenig's argument for preventive military action to combat Tehran's nuclear program -- "Time to Attack Iran" (January/February 2012) [1] -- suffers from three problems. First, its view of Iranian leaders' risk calculations is self-contradictory. Second, it misreads nuclear history. And third, it underestimates the United States' ability to contain a nuclear Iran. When these problems are addressed, it is clear that, contrary to what Kroenig contends, attacking Iran is not "the least bad option."

Kroenig's view of the way Iranian leaders are willing to take on risks is deeply incongruous. In his view, a nuclear bomb will push Tehran to block U.S. initiatives in the Middle East, unleash conventional and terrorist aggression on U.S. forces and allies, and possibly engage in a nuclear exchange with Israel. This would mean Iranian leaders are reckless: given the United States' conventional and nuclear superiority, any of these actions would provoke considerable retaliation from Washington. And, of course, a nuclear exchange with Israel would invite annihilation. At the same time, Kroenig suggests that Tehran would remain remarkably timid after a preventive strike from the United States. Presented with clear redlines, Iran would not retaliate against U.S. troops and allies or attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz. Kroenig's inconsistency is clear: If Iranian leaders are
as reckless as he seems to believe, a preventive strike would likely escalate to a full-blown war. If they are not, then there is no reason to think that a nuclear Iran would be uncontainable. In short, a preventive attack on Iran can hardly be both limited and necessary.

Kroenig’s argument misreads nuclear history at least three times. First, he writes that a targeted preventive strike would likely wipe out the nuclear program in Iran, as strikes against Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007 did in those countries. These comparisons are misleading. Recent research based on captured Iraqi documents demonstrates that the 1981 Israeli attack on the Osirak reactor, near Baghdad, actually spurred a covert nuclear weapons program at other sites. Indeed, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein remained determined to revive his nuclear program until he was removed from power in 2003. What prevented him from achieving that goal was the decade-long U.S.-led containment regime put in place after the 1991 Gulf War. The Iraqi case suggests that any attacks that do not depose the Iranian regime, too, would cause it to accelerate its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Kroenig's prescription might therefore precipitate the very outcome he is trying to avoid.

As for Syria, Damascus' nuclear program was just budding. The country boasted only one exploratory facility, which was shattered easily by a single aerial bombing carried out by Israel in September 2007 under the cloak of night. But Iran's nuclear program is much more advanced and is already of industrial proportions. Any attack on Tehran would involve destroying numerous nuclear-program and air-defense targets, making it far more costly and less likely to succeed than the Israeli raid against Syria's Deir ez-Zor reactor. More, Iran's advanced program reflects Tehran's greater resolve to develop nuclear capabilities, so, post-attack, Tehran would be ever more likely to double down on developing a weapon. Furthermore, although Kroenig hopes that a targeted strike would destabilize the Iranian regime, there is no basis for such optimism. Being a civilian, parliamentary, oil-rich theocracy, Iran is relatively stable. Put simply, a preventive strike against Iran can hardly be both limited and effective.

Kroenig misreads history again when he considers a nuclear exchange between Iran and Israel. In his view, they "lack nearly all the safeguards that helped the United States and the Soviet Union avoid a nuclear exchange during the Cold War." Yet the United States and the Soviet Union avoided a nuclear exchange even during the hottest crisis of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, at a moment in which Soviet retaliatory capability was still uncertain, there were no clear direct communication channels between the two leaderships, and Soviet experience managing their nuclear arsenal was no longer than five years. Moreover, the historical record shows that even young and unstable nuclear powers have avoided nuclear escalation despite acute crises. Pakistan and India avoided nuclear war in Kargil in 1999, as well as after the terrorist attacks targeting the Indian parliament in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008. When national survival is at stake, even opaque and supposedly "irrational" regimes with nuclear weapons have historically behaved in prudent ways.

Kroenig's final abuse of history comes when he posits a cascade of nuclear proliferation across the Middle East in response to an Iranian bomb. He mentions Saudi Arabia, and implies that Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey might all follow suit. Yet none of these states, which can count on U.S. support against Iran, nuclearized in response to Israel's nuclearization (against which they cannot count on U.S. backing, mind you). And more generally, the United States has a successful record of preventing clients from acquiring nuclear weapons in response to a regional enemy, such as South Korea and Japan in response to North Korean nuclear acquisition. (Washington agreed with Pakistani nuclearization in response to India.)
Taking the long view, Kroenig's argument reveals an unwarranted skepticism about Washington's ability to contain a nuclear Iran. This skepticism is all the more surprising considering Kroenig's work on the benefits of U.S. nuclear superiority. Existing U.S. security guarantees, based on current capabilities, give allies little incentive to nuclearize. Egypt and Saudi Arabia are among the largest recipients of U.S. military support, and Turkey is a member of NATO. Reinforcing U.S. ties with friends in the region would be easier, cheaper, and less risky than attacking the Iranian nuclear program.

Instead, the United States should heed the lessons of the North Korean nuclearization. Not so long ago, Washington had to face an aggressive regime in Pyongyang intent on developing nuclear weapons. The United States rejected a preventive strike in 1994 for fear that the outcome would be worse than its target's nuclear acquisition. This was the right decision. After North Korea acquired nuclear weapons, none of the consequences that Kroenig's argument would predict materialized. U.S. security guarantees contained Pyongyang and persuaded South Korea and Japan not to acquire nuclear weapons. Nobody believes that the world is better off with a bomb in North Korea -- but the record shows that it hasn't brought the end of the world, either.

Military action against Iran would be a profound strategic miscalculation. For all the talk of retrenchment, the U.S. military might remains the most powerful in the world, and it can successfully minimize consequences of an Iranian bomb, should one come to pass, by containing Tehran's ambitions, dissuading regional proliferation, and providing security assurances to its allies.

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