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# What war with Iran would look like

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*Editor's note: The following is a summary of this week's Time magazine cover story.*

([Time.com](#)) -- The first message was routine enough: a "Prepare to Deploy Order" sent through Naval communications channels to a submarine, an Aegis-class cruiser, two minesweepers and two minehunters.

The orders didn't actually command the ships out of port; they just said be ready to move by October 1.

A deployment of minesweepers to the east coast of Iran would seem to suggest that a much discussed, but until now largely theoretical, prospect has become real: that the U.S. may be preparing for war with Iran.

The Bush team, led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, has done more diplomatic spadework on Iran than on any other project in its 5 1/2 years in office.

For more than 18 months, Rice has kept the administration's hard-line faction at bay while leading a coalition, which includes four other members of the U.N. Security Council, that is trying to force Tehran to halt its nuclear ambitions.

But superpowers don't always get to choose their enemies or the timing of their confrontations. The fact that all sides would risk losing so much in armed conflict doesn't mean they won't stumble into one anyway.

So what would it look like? Interviews with dozens of experts and government officials in Washington, Tehran and elsewhere in the Middle East paint a sobering picture: Military action against Iran's nuclear facilities would have a decent chance of succeeding, but at a staggering cost.

And therein lies the excruciating calculus facing the U.S. and its allies: Is the cost of confronting Iran greater than the dangers of living with a nuclear Iran? And can anything short of war persuade Tehran's fundamentalist regime to give up its dangerous game?

No one is talking about a ground invasion of Iran. Too many U.S. troops are tied down elsewhere to make it possible, and besides, it isn't necessary. If the U.S. goal is simply to stunt Iran's nuclear program, it can be done better and more safely by air.

An attack limited to Iran's nuclear facilities would nonetheless require a massive campaign. Experts say that Iran has between 18 and 30 nuclear-related facilities. The sites are dispersed around the country -- some in the open, some cloaked in the guise of conventional factories, some buried deep underground.



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A U.S. strike would have a lasting impression on Iran's rulers. U.S. officials believe that a campaign of several days could set back Iran's nuclear program by two to three years. Hit hard enough, some believe, Iranians might develop second thoughts about their government's designs as a regional nuclear power.

Some U.S. foes of Iran's regime believe that the crisis of legitimacy that the ruling clerics would face in the wake of a U.S. attack could trigger their downfall, though others are convinced it would unite the population with the government in anti-American rage.

Given the chaos that a war might unleash, what options does the world have to avoid it? One approach would be for the U.S. to accept Iran as a nuclear power and learn to live with an Iranian bomb, focusing its efforts on deterrence rather than pre-emption.

The risk is that a nuclear-armed Iran would use its regional primacy to become the dominant foreign power in Iraq, threaten Israel and make it harder for Washington to exert its will in the region. And it could provoke Sunni countries in the region, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to start nuclear programs of their own to contain rising Shiite power.

Those equally unappetizing prospects -- war or a new arms race in the Middle East -- explain why the White House is kicking up its efforts to resolve the Iran problem before it gets that far. Washington is doing everything it can to make Iran think twice about its ongoing game of stonewall. Everyone has been careful -- for now -- to stick to Rice's diplomatic emphasis.

"Nobody is considering a military option at this point," says an administration official. "We're trying to prevent a situation in which the president finds himself having to decide between a nuclear-armed Iran or going to war. The best hope of avoiding that dilemma is hard-nosed diplomacy, one that has serious consequences."

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