

Nothing short of nukes will work

By [Gwynne Dyer](#)

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Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen (R) accompanied by Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Photo / AP

When Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the highest-ranking American officer, was asked recently on NBC's *Meet The Press* show whether the United States has a military plan for an attack on Iran, he replied simply: "We do".

General staffs are supposed to plan for even the most unlikely future contingencies. Right down to the 1930s, the US maintained and annually updated plans for the invasion of Canada – and the Canadian military made plans to pre-empt the invasion.

But what the planning process will have shown, in this case, is that there is no way for the US to win a non-nuclear war with Iran.

The US could "win" by dropping hundreds of nuclear weapons on Iran's military bases, nuclear facilities and industrial centres (cities) and killing five to 10 million people. But short of that, nothing works.

On this we have the word of Richard Clarke, counter-terrorism adviser in the White House under three administrations.

In the early 1990s, Clarke said in an interview with the *New York Times* four years ago, the Clinton Administration had considered a bombing campaign against Iran, but the military professionals told them not to do it.

"After a long debate, the highest levels of the military could not forecast a way in which things would end favourably for the US," he said. The Pentagon's planners have war-gamed an attack on Iran and they just can't make it come out as a US victory.

It's not the fear of Iranian nuclear weapons that makes the US Joint Chiefs of Staff so reluctant to get involved in a war with Iran. Those weapons don't exist and the whole justification for the war would be to make sure that they never do.

The problem is that there's nothing the US can do to Iran, short of nuking the place, that would really force Tehran to kneel and beg for mercy.

It can bomb Iran's nuclear sites and military installations to its heart's content, but everything it destroys can be rebuilt in a few years.

And there is no way that the US could actually invade Iran.

There are some 80 million people in Iran and, although many of them don't like the present regime, they are almost all fervent patriots who would resist a foreign invasion.

Iran is a mountainous country and big: four times the size of Iraq.

The Iranian army currently numbers about 450,000 men, slightly smaller than the US Army – but unlike the US Army, it does not have its troops scattered across literally dozens of countries.

If the White House were to propose anything larger than minor military incursions along Iran's south coast, senior American generals would resign in protest.

Without the option of a land war, the only lever the US would have on Iranian policy is the threat of yet more bombs – but if they aren't nuclear, then they aren't very persuasive. Whereas Iran would have lots of options for bringing pressure on the US.

Just stopping Iran's oil exports would drive the oil price sky-high in a tight market. Iran accounts for about 7 per cent of internationally traded oil.

But it could also block another 40 per cent of global oil exports just by sinking tankers coming from Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states with its lethal Noor anti-ship missiles.

The Noor anti-ship missile is a locally built version of the Chinese YJ-82. It has a 200km range, enough to cover all the major choke points in the Gulf. It flies at twice the speed of sound just metres above the sea's surface and has a tiny radar profile. Its single-shot kill probability has been put as high as 98 per cent.

Iran's mountainous coastline extends along the whole northern side of the Gulf and these missiles have easily concealed mobile launchers. They would sink tankers with ease and, in a few days, insurance rates for tankers planning to enter the Gulf would become prohibitive, effectively shutting down the region's oil exports completely.

Meanwhile, Iran would start supplying modern surface-to-air missiles to the Taleban in Afghanistan and that would soon shut down the US military effort there. (It was the arrival of US-supplied Stinger missiles in Afghanistan in the late 1980s that drove Russian helicopters from the sky and ultimately doomed the whole Soviet intervention there.)

Iranian ballistic missiles would strike US bases on the southern (Arab) side of the Gulf and Iran's Hizbollah allies in Beirut would start dropping missiles on Israel.

The US would have no options for escalation other than the nuclear one, and pressure on it to stop the war would mount by the day as the world's industries and transport ground to a halt.

The end would be an embarrassing retreat by the US and the definitive establishment of Iran as the dominant power of the Gulf region. That was the outcome of every war-game the Pentagon played and Mike Mullen knows it.

Gwynne Dyer is a London-based independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.

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2. Rock (Onehunga)
01:41PM Saturday, 07 Aug 2010
The irony, using nuclear weapons to stop someone else from possibly having the potential, someday, to be able to use them in a nuclear suicide moment of madness, IF they develop them.
All for world peace.
There is one flaw in Gwynne's "only battle option". American arrogance.
Just because the US is beaten every time in every war-game ever played is no reason not to go ahead with an invasion of Iran.
The Iranians in the war-games were played by US officers. Far superior to anything Iran could ever come up with.
Crazy I know. But I've seen crazier.
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3. Sam D (Kumeu)
01:41PM Saturday, 07 Aug 2010
A very interesting article, thank you! I have a question though; what is stopping Iran from supplying surface-to-air missiles and other arms to the Taleban now?
4 Likes
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4. Nicholas Alexander (Auckland City)
09:01AM Monday, 09 Aug 2010
If this is the price of war, what, then, is the price of peace?
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