

November 14, 2011, 7:47 pm

Before We Bomb Iran, Let's Have a Serious Conversation

By [JOHN H. JOHNS](#)

It is common for candidates in presidential primaries to use bellicose language to prove their toughness. This kind of rhetoric is especially useful in Republican primaries, where audiences have a firm belief in the use of military power to solve problems. But toughness and wisdom are not the same thing.

The difference between the two was on display in the discussion of Iran that opened Saturday night's Republican foreign policy debate, as it has been throughout the Republican campaign. Asked if he would consider a military option should current efforts fail to deter Iran's work on developing nuclear weapons, Mitt Romney said, "of course you take military action, it's unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon."

Newt Gingrich echoed Romney's call. Previously, Herman Cain called preemptive force against Iran his "option B." Even Jon Huntsman, who has been the most sober of the candidates on foreign policy, suggested that "if you want an example of when I would consider the use of American force, it would be that." Rick Perry let us know that he would support Israeli military strikes too.

The problem with these arguments is that they flatly ignore or reject outright the best advice of America's national security leadership. [Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen](#), former congressman Admiral Joe Sestak and [former CENTCOM Commander General Anthony Zinni](#) are only a few of the many who have warned us to think carefully about the repercussions of attacking Iran. Two months ago, Sestak put it bluntly: "A military strike, whether it's by land or air, against Iran would make the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion look like a cakewalk with regard to the impact on the United States' national security."

While rhetoric about military strikes may work as an applause line in Republican debates, there is little or no chance that military action would be quite so simple. Quite the contrary. Defense leaders agree that the military option would likely result in serious unintended consequences.

Meir Dagan, the recently retired chief of Israel's Mossad, shares the assessment of the Americans cited above. He noted earlier this year that attacking Iran "would mean regional war" and went on to say that arguments for military strikes were "the stupidest thing I have ever heard."

To be clear: everyone can agree that Iran is a serious problem. The development of Iranian missile technology is credible enough that NATO is (smartly) working with Russia to develop a defensive missile shield. And the most recent report from the International Atomic Energy Agency on Iran's nuclear program should rally the international community to apply even more pressure.

But while Iran is a serious issue, it is equally true that they have been effectively isolated and weakened by the one-two punch of smart sanctions and the democratic winds sweeping through the region. The international sanctions have seriously damaged Iran's economy and exacerbated a growing feud between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. It is important to avoid steps that would unite these political blocs.

Meanwhile, Iran's most important regional ally, Syria, is struggling to avoid becoming the next regime toppled by a popular uprising. And given its own deep unpopularity with the Iranian public, the government may yet face a winter of domestic discontent. It has already had to face down strong segments of its population that want a less bellicose attitude toward the rest of the world.

We didn't ask the tough questions in 2003 when America went to war in Iraq in search of weapons of mass destruction. The security of America and the stability of a largely redrawn Middle East depend on our ability to continue to isolate and contain a weakened Iran.

Running for President means running for commander in chief of America's armed forces. If the candidates favor military action, as is their prerogative, they should desist from peddling the false notion of a simple "surgical" strike and answer the hard questions. How would they contain a larger regional war? Would they commit to a ground invasion? How would they pay for it? What is their view on the implications of another major deployment for the U.S. military? And why are they ignoring the advice of some of America's most experienced military leaders?

America ought not consider another war in the Middle East without a very serious discussion of the consequences. Political candidates should curb their jingoistic, chauvinistic emotions and temper their world view with a little reflective, rational thought.

John H. Johns is a retired brigadier general. He served as a combat arms officer in the Army for over 26 years and taught national security strategy at the National Defense University for 14 years.

- [Copyright 2011 The New York Times Company](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [NYTimes.com 620 Eighth Avenue New York, NY 10018](#)