

Bomb, Bomb, Bomb Bomb Iran? Testing the Podhoretz Argument for U.S. Military Action Against Iran*

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Abstract

The issue of threat by Iran to the United States is at the forefront of American foreign policy. One perspective, what we refer to herein as the “Podhoretz Argument,” flows from claims by Norman Podhoretz (*Commentary*, 2007) that the most effective strategy by which to redress this threat is for the United States to employ military force to eliminate Iran’s nuclear capability. We examine this claim with data on military conflict between the United States and opponents states (e.g., Iraq, North Korea, Libya) during the period 1945–2002. Our analysis of historical patterns suggests little support for the Podhoretz Argument. Indeed, rather than eliminate further Iranian threats to the United States, our analysis suggests that such an attack on Iran will likely hasten the the occurrence of further military confrontations between the United States and Iran.

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Executive Summary

Norman Podhoretz (“The Case for Bombing Iran,” *Commentary*, 2007) argues that the most effective strategy by which to eliminate the threat posed by Iran to the United States is for America to employ military force against Iran. We examine the validity of this argument historically—i.e., that the use of American military force neutralizes future threats from hostile states—with data on military conflict between the United States and hostile states (e.g., Iraq, North Korea, Libya) during the period 1945–2002. We draw the following primary conclusions:

1. During the post-WWII period, American military attacks—actions resulting greater than 100 casualties—accelerate the need for subsequent applications of military force by the United States;
2. Militarized force of a magnitude great enough to eliminate Iran’s nuclear capability is unlikely to stimulate a cooperative Iran. Rather, it is likely to elicit reciprocal hostility by Iran, which in turn will require additional applications of military force by the United States; and
3. The analysis underscores the importance of assessing foreign policy proposals against the general historical record. Thus, while it might be accepted that the appeasement strategy employed against Hitler at the outset of WWII was a failure, this does not mean that a strategy of military force against contemporary Iran will result in cooperation.

In short, the plain and brutal truth is that if Iran is to be prevented from developing a nuclear arsenal, there is no alternative to the actual use of military force—any more than there was an alternative to force if Hitler was to be stopped in 1938.—Norman Podhoretz (*Commentary*, June 2007)

Introduction

The question of how to deal with the threat posed by Iran is central to contemporary American foreign policy.¹ One perspective on the threat posed by Iran is that American foreign policy should engage Iran diplomatically, with varying degrees of rewards and punishments, or “carrots and sticks.” This is the approach that has been followed by successive U.S. administrations in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. A second perspective is that the threat posed by Iran can only be neutralized through the application of military force, specifically strategic air strikes. This force-based perspective suggests that a military strike by the the United States against Iran’s military facilities will significantly reduce the threat posed by Iran and its most prominent representative, President Ahmadinejad, to the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.

Perhaps the most visible proponent of this second, force-based perspective is Norman Podhoretz, former editor of *Commentary* magazine.² In a 2007 article in *Commentary* entitled, “The Case for Bombing Iran,” Podhoretz provides the most thorough explication of the reasoning underlying the aforementioned force-based perspective.³

We evaluate Podhoretz’s reasoning, one that we refer to as the “Podhoretz Argument,” in the remainder of this report. To do so, we employ social science tools to understand whether historically the American use of military force against opponent states, similar to that presented by contemporary Iran, reduces the threat posed by these states thereafter. As such, we assess policy options with respect to the threatening posture assumed by contemporary Iran in the broader historical context of American foreign policy options and outcomes with traditional military opponents.

In a narrow sense, our approach is similar to that of Podhoretz: We evaluate contemporary policy options by evaluating similar historical outcomes. This said, we pursue a strategy that corrects for what we call “selective comparison,” in which policy options are evaluated relative to one or a handful of historical cases, such as Hitler’s Germany in 1938. We argue that these selective comparisons might not be fair in that the cases are not reflective of prevailing historical patterns in terms of policy choices that succeeded and failed. Our correction enables us to answer the following question: *Does the use of military force by the United States reduce the degree of threat posed by foreign opponents?*

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. First, we distill the argument Podhoretz develops in support of bombing Iran. Second, we test Podhoretz's argument against the historical record of American foreign policy interactions with traditional opponents, such as the Soviet Union, Cuba, and North Korea. We do so by discussing the assumptions underlying our test and discussing the results of our analysis using plain language. Last, we draw several conclusions.

The Podhoretz Argument

Podhoretz's reasoning for the use of military force against Iran is anchored, first and foremost, to his expectations regarding the scope of the Iranian threat, as well as the likely responsiveness of the Iranian regime to foreign policy pressure. Podhoretz argues that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad intends to destroy Israel, dominate Middle Eastern oil, spread Islam's influence throughout Europe, and stimulate a steady diminution of America's global power. Thus, according to Podhoretz, Iran is the most visible and capable leader of a world-wide threat to American interests, a threat that Podhoretz labels "World War IV."

From Podhoretz's perspective, the nature and expansion of the Iranian threat is similar to the phenomenon that the United States and its European allies experienced during the Cold War (a period that Podhoretz refers to as "World War III".) During World War III, the Soviet Union attempted to exert greater control over European governments by empowering European Communist parties, a process Podhoretz refers to as "Finlandization." By luck and shrewd policy, the United States and Europe thwarted Finlandization and prevailed in the Cold War.

Despite this success against Communism, a new, perhaps more ominous threat—Islamization—confronts European governments and the United States. Yet, from Podhoretz's perspective the new Europe embodied in the EU is overly reliant on "soft power," a posture that precludes direct retaliation against threatening states, such as Iran. A foreign policy based on soft power is, according to Podhoretz, doomed to fail. Thus, from Podhoretz's perspective, "engagement" and "living with a nuclear Iran" are not feasible, because Iran's destiny is revolutionary.

To underscore the inappropriate nature of the contemporary EU posture toward Islam and Iran, Podhoretz draws parallels with the Allied experiences with Hitler in the prelude to WWII. Podhoretz argues that the WWII strategy analogous to contemporary engagement—i.e., the Munich strategy, or the infamous policy of appeasement—failed precisely because Germany's Hitler was a *revolutionary leader* intent upon destroying the international status quo, rather than a political leader that might be reasoned with and deterred from aggressive behavior. For Podhoretz, Iran's president Ahmadinejad is, much like Hitler, unresponsive to the standard "carrots and sticks."

From Podhoretz's perspective, then, the tools of diplomacy and economic sanctions are likely to bear little fruit in terms of reducing the Iranian threat. Indeed, these strategies, much like Munich's appeasement, will merely be manipulated to

further advantage by Ahmadinejad, a daunting path, given the potential regional and global implications of a nuclear-capable Iran. As such, Podhoretz reasons that the only means by which to eliminate the Iranian threat is through an American-led “campaign of air strikes.” For Podhoretz, “a bombing campaign would without question set back its nuclear program for years to come, and might even lead to the overthrow of the mullahs.”

In sum, the Podhoretz argument is grounded in the claim that an Ahmadinejad-led Iran is likely to be unresponsive to any policy other than one grounded by militarized force. As such, employing force can transform a threatening relationship in American foreign policy into one that reflects a marked reduction in hostility. Furthermore, Podhoretz’s argument is premised on the notion that the use of force can effect change in behavior by its punitive impact. Having been sufficiently awed and cowed by United States military might and the destruction it wreaks, the Iranian government will cease engaging in the kinds of behaviors the United States government finds objectionable. Thus, Podhoretz’s policy is clearly grounded in the belief that military force can induce change without the need for military personnel to compel change, as the United States did in World War II when it imposed terms of unconditional surrender on the Axis powers through force of arms.

Podhoretz’s argument is powerfully stated. Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with Podhoretz’s reasoning, his argument provokes the general question regarding the effectiveness of military force in restraining foes of the United States. One finds evidence of a similar perspective on the likely effectiveness of military force in dealing with Iran from the Bush Administration, as well as statements by Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton. Indeed, during the Democratic primaries Clinton vowed to “obliterate” Iran if it attacked Israel.⁴ Thus, while the logical implications of a hawkish policy are stated most cogently and precisely by Podhoretz, the general sentiment regarding Iran and the utility of force are certainly shared by many politicians and policymakers across the ideological spectrum. We devote the remainder of this report to investigating this question in its general form, such that the likely outcome of an American-led bombing campaign against Iran can be evaluated with respect to American foreign policy actions undertaken against opponents historically.

Testing the Podhoretz Argument

Assumptions

We make the following assumptions in testing the Podhoretz Argument. First, we assume that the question of whether bombing Iran will reduce the threat to the United States can be assessed against the full history of militarized interactions between the United States and threatening states. For example, we reason that in order to understand whether bombing Iran will result in a more compliant and less threatening Iran, it is important that we examine the impact of America’s use of

militarized strategies in the past with other opponents—e.g., Libya, North Korea, Cuba, Iraq and even Iran.

Second, we assume that the American foreign policy act of using strategic air strikes, or attacking an opponent state can be evaluated in the broader context of military force in foreign policy. This context might be thought of as a range of actions by the United States, including “shows of force,” such as mobilizing troops on a border or the deployment of naval vessels. As such, the use of military force might include a cross-border incursion by ground troops, or a strategic air strike, for example.

Last, we assume that the effectiveness of the application of military force can be assessed against two, related benchmarks. First, whether an initial American use of military force lengthens the period of time, or peace, until the United States finds it necessary to re-employ military force against an opposing state. Second, after an initial American use of force, the subsequent length of time before an opponent state engages in militarily threatening behavior against the United States.

Considered collectively, the Podhoretz argument suggests the degree of militarized force employed by the United States and the period of peace following the application of force will be inversely related: *The greater the military force applied by the United States, the greater length of post-hostility peace with an opponent state.*

The Test

We test Podhoretz’s argument using data on post-1945 American military actions to develop a model predicting the factors that influence the duration between a militarized event and the next use of force between the United States and a target state.⁵ Militarized events can range from very low levels of forceful behavior in which military force is threatened all the way up to high levels of force in which the parties engage one another in combat. Our sample procedure results in the identification of 172 American militarized interactions with 36 opponent states during the 1945–2002 period.

To predict the duration between an American militarized interaction and the next usage of force between the United States and an opponents state, we develop a very simple empirical model grounded in *four key causal forces* that form the foundation of the relationship between the United State and its military opponents.⁶ These key causal force are as follows:

1. *History.* We control for the historical relationship between the two sides by including a variable describing the total number of previous militarized encounters between the United States and an opponent state at a given point in time (e.g., between the United States and Iran in the year 1980);
2. *Level of Force.* We distinguish two specific types of militarized interactions, whether the United States was involved in an “attack” or a “clash” with another state.⁷ By way of example, an American missile strike on Iran that went

without retaliation by Iran would be coded as an “attack,” while an American air strike that was met by an Iranian military response would be coded as a “clash.” Given the likely need for a sustained bombing campaign if the military option is chosen by the United States to deal with the Iranian nuclear program, as well as the high probability of some sort of military response by Iran to such a strike, *we regard a clash as being commensurate with the actions contained in the Podhoretz Argument*; and

3. *Consequences.* We identify the consequences of a militarized interaction in terms of the number of fatalities produced by the conflict, as well as whether or not the conflict ended in stalemate.

Findings

In general, our model provides little support for Podhoretz’s argument that American military action against Iran is likely to positively affect the durability of peace after the attack. In fact, our model shows strong support for the idea that American military clashes *reduce*, rather than extend, the durability of peace following a use of military force. Historically, American military clashes have sharply reduced the durability of peace afterward, although this effect diminishes the longer the United States and an opponent go without fighting again. We note a similar effect in terms of the number of fatalities produced by a military interaction; specifically, the greater the number of fatalities resulting from a military interaction between the United States and an opponent, the *less durable* the peace between them afterward. Undoubtedly, there is a selection effect at work here, such that the United States is most likely to be involved in high casualty clashes with those states with which it has the most hostile relationships. Nevertheless, this historical tendency runs in direct contrast to Podhoretz’s argument.

While our general model runs contrary to Podhoretz’s expectations, a fairer test of his claim is to simulate the conditions specifically associated with an American militarized interaction directed at Iran. To this end, we construct three hypothetical scenarios and use our empirical model to estimate peace durability for each:

1. *Low-level Conflict.* The United States simply engages in a show of military force directed against Iran that results in no fatalities on either side. For example, the dispatch of an aircraft carrier battle group to the Persian Gulf accompanied by American threats to use force;
2. *Attack.* The United States initiates a military attack on Iran resulting in moderate casualties of approximately 26–100 fatalities. For example, a limited American missile strike against Iranian military facilities; and
3. *Clash.* A military clash between the United States and Iran that resulting in 500–999 fatalities. For example, a sustained aerial bombing campaign con-

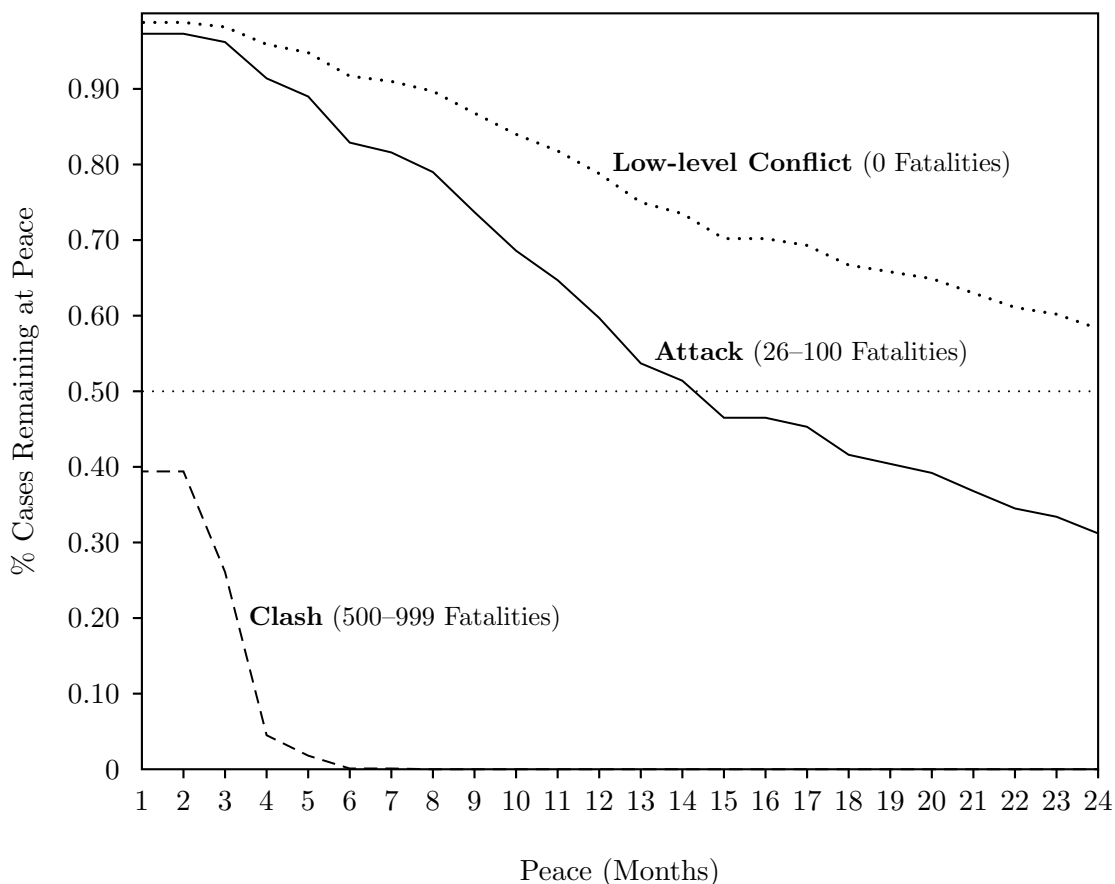
ducted by the United States that results in Iranian military retaliation against American air, naval, or ground forces.

The predictions produced under these three scenarios of ‘Low-level Conflict,’ ‘Clash,’ and ‘Attack’ for United States interactions with Iran are illustrated in Figure 1. Similar to the general findings, the United States–Iran simulations run directly *counter* to Podhoretz’s argument. A clash against Iran reduces the durability of peace afterward relative to lower levels of militarized action, an effect that deepens still further as the number of casualties produced by the clash increase. There is less than a 2% probability of either the United States or Iran using military force against the other one month after a low-level, casualty-free militarized interaction between them. By contrast, following the military clash envisioned by scenario three, there is better than a 60% probability that either the United States or Iran will engage in military force against the other side as soon as one month after the initial clash. Indeed, while there is nearly an 80% probability that the United States and Iran will avoid another usage of force against each other one year after a low-level militarized interaction, there is less than a 1% probability of peace surviving that long after a military clash between the United States and Iran. All the more strikingly, there is nearly a 60% probability of a two-year peace after a low-level militarized interaction between the United States and Iran, while the predicted probability of peace surviving that long after a clash is effectively zero.

In this sense, a military clash between the United States and Iran represents the worst case scenario between the two sides, substantially reducing the durability of peace after the conflict. What about a more limited attack against Iran, one that produces fewer casualties? Our simulations of the likely consequences of military attack, one without an Iranian military response, shows less of a strong effect upon the durability of peace than that produced by a military clash but one still inconsistent with Podhoretz’s argument that an attack will establish a more durable peace. Immediately after a low casualty United States attack against Iran, the probability of renewed violence between the two sides one month afterward is quite similar to that produced by a low-level militarized interaction. Yet, the gap in expected peace between the attack and low-level militarized interaction scenarios grows across time, such that while there is nearly an 80% probability of peace surviving one year following low-level conflict, there is less than a 60% probability of a similar peace duration following a United States attack against Iran with low casualties. There is nearly a 60% probability that the United States and Iran will avoid a usage of force against one another two years after a low-level, casualty-free militarized interaction. This survival rate drops steeply for military attacks, such that our model only predicts a 31% two-year survival rate after a low casualty United States attack against Iran.

Considered together with the predictions for U.S. clashes with Iraq, we see no evidence that any type of significant United States usage of military force is likely to translate into a sustained peace between the countries as Podhoretz argues. Instead,

Figure 1: Predicted Peace Following American Military Conflict with Iran (Low-level Conflict, Attack and Clash Scenarios).



as the intensity of violence between the United States and opponent states increases and as the number of casualties produced by the violence increases, the more likely the United States and its opponents are to use force against one another in the near future.⁸

Conclusions

In developing his advocacy for bombing Iran, Podhoretz identifies important parallels with Hitler's Germany, and the Munich strategy of appeasement. For Podhoretz, the lesson is that some political leaders, such as Adolph Hitler, as well as Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, will not respond to pressure via diplomatic tools, or even threats of military force. Rather, revolutionary leaders, leaders intent upon razing the international system, will only respond to (or be eliminated by) the ap-

plication of military force. The failure of the Munich strategy, therefore, gives the lie to the appeasement strategy, and undermines contemporary efforts to deal with Iran via accommodative methods.

While we believe that counterfactuals are an important component of the scientific process, we argue that selective counterfactuals are unhelpful for evaluating policy options. For example, while one might argue that the Munich strategy of appeasement failed in the case of Hitler's European aggressions in 1938–9, and that an allied application of military force might have prevented, or limited the scope of, the Second World War, it does not necessarily follow that such an application of force would have *solved the problem* of a threatening Hitler. We argue that while the case of Hitler might suggest that the strategy of appeasement is unlikely to deter such an aggressor, and that preemptive force would be more effective, this historical case does not *prove* that an early application of force against Hitler would have been more effective.

Indeed, consider a more recent example: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. American President George H. W. Bush also relied upon the Munich analogy to argue that a strategy of appeasement would neither remove Saddam Hussein's armies from Kuwait, nor eliminate the temptation of Iraq to seek further territorial acquisitions in the Middle East. From one perspective, this application of force was successful in that Kuwait was liberated from Iraq. Yet, this analysis of the Persian Gulf War ignores the fact that the American-led coalition's application of a high level of militarized force—war—failed to solve the problem of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and Iraq. Indeed, the emergence of Iraq as a threat in 2002–2003, one grounded in the belief that Hussein retained and planned further development of nuclear capability, suggests that the Persian Gulf War failed to solve the problem of Iraq's threat.

Therefore, the cases of Iraq in 1990–91 and 2003 suggests that the application military force might not solve the root problem. More generally, this case might cast doubt on the reasoning that the application of force, something akin to contemporary strategic bombing, by the allies in 1939 would resolve the threat posed by Hitler. Indeed, the case of Iraq between 1990 and 2003 might suggest that the allies prior to the Second World War would find it necessary to invade, occupy, and change the government of, Hitler's Germany in order to significantly alter the long-term behavior of Iran. A policy of invasion and regime change is significantly different than one involving strategic bombing.

Here, we argue that counterfactuals are embedded in the historical record. Yet, their collective weight and relevance to a policy question can only be ascertained when hypothetical policy claims are assessed against a representative empirical record, such that the variation of the effectiveness of policy choices is reflected across prior instances in which the United States resorted to military force against opponents in foreign policy. Specifically, it is important that the empirical record to which we assess the Podhoretz argument is reflective of instances in which bombing

an opponent reduces the opponent's subsequent threat to the United States, as well as instances in which bombing an opponent failed to reduce the subsequent threat. We assert that only by including a fair representation of policy success and failure in one's analysis can policies, such as the proposed policy of "Bomb, Bomb, Bomb Bomb Iran," be evaluated as viable policy choices for American policymakers.

Author Biographies

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Notes

¹Republican presidential nominee, Senator John McCain's response to a question regarding the Iranian threat with reference to the famous Beach Boys cover of the Fred Fassert song, "Barbara Ann," is the inspiration of the title of the present report. McCain made the following remark: "That old, eh, that old Beach Boys song, 'Bomb Iran,' Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, anyway, ah ..." Video of McCain's statement is available on YouTube here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-zoPgv_nYg.

²Podhoretz remains editor at large.

³Podhoretz's article is available in electronic form at the following location: <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/printArticle.cfm/The-Case-for-Bombing-Iran-10882>, and was downloaded electronically on 3/19/2008. A video interview with Podhoretz in which he details his reasoning regarding military force against Iran is available on YouTube located here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bLq6pz0c5w>.

⁴*New York Times*, "Clinton Says U.S. Could 'Totally Obliterate' Iran," April 22, 2008.

⁵We construct the dataset for our analysis and identify these militarized events by relying upon the Correlates of War (COW) Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data to identify all instances of military action between the United States and a target country in the period 1945–2002. The current version of MID data are described in Faten Ghosn, Glenn Palmer, and Stuart Bremer. (2004). "The MID3 Data Set, 1993-2001: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 21:133-154, and are available on the COW website at <http://www.correlatesofwar.org/>

⁶Specifically, we estimate an empirical model that enables us to simulate the impact of the American use of military force on post-force peace. Specifically, we estimate a Cox regression model for our analysis, a model well suited for examining the durations between events. The empirical results of our analysis are reported on Prof. J. Michael Greig's website at <http://www.psci.unt.edu/Greig/iran>.

⁷The MID data identifies an "attack" as the use of military force by one side against another, while a "clash" involves both a use of force by one side and a responding usage of force by the other side. As a result, for our purposes we code one variable identifying whether or not the United States engaged in an attack against a target country and code a second variable identifying whether the United States was involved in a clash with another country. Thus, clash and attack are mutually exclusive events.

⁸Our conclusion is similar to Reiter's assessment of the "Osiraq Myth," a strategy suggesting that preventive war, in this case by Israel, reduces future threats from hostile states, such as Iraq. See Dan Reiter (2006). "The Osiraq Myth and the Track Record of Preventive Military Attacks," Ridgway Center Policy Briefs, University of Pittsburgh 4:2.