

BOOK REVIEW

A Time to Attack: The Looming Iranian Nuclear Threat

Matthew Kroenig

(Palgrave Macmillan Trade, 272 pp., \$28.00)

Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy

Kenneth M. Pollack

(Simon & Schuster, 560 pp., \$30.00)

By Jaci Dickerson

The United States is currently facing one of the most important foreign policy and national security issues of this century: the development and implementation of a strategy to neutralize the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. Although the United States supported Iran's development of a peaceful nuclear program for energy production in the 1960s and 1970s, the Iranian Revolution, the country's renewed interest in nuclear technology, and the revelation of secret facilities in the early 2000s have fueled suspicion that Iran is actively seeking nuclear weapons (CFR 2015). As a member of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, a nuclear-armed Iran would disrupt the global non-proliferation regime and threaten its longstanding foes, posing a threat to US national security and leadership worldwide. The seriousness and complexity of the problem call for analysis and understanding of options and their consequences. Yet the same urgency also complicates that analysis, par-

ticularly in cases where a perceived threat drives the timeline for decision-making. In the case of Iran, the recent US and partner negotiations with Iran to limit its nuclear program offer a unique opportunity for foreign policy analysis. Given the ongoing efforts to identify a diplomatic solution to the issue, US policymakers and foreign policy experts have been allowed the time to discuss and debate potential options, weigh their effects, and compare methods, which are likely to be thoroughly reviewed once the crisis is over.

The two books reviewed here—Kenneth Pollack's *Unthinkable* and Matthew Kroenig's *A Time to Attack*—are examples of this work. A brief comparison of these works demonstrates the different assumptions and values that the authors used during their analyses, which affected the options they chose, how they were organized, and how they compared. Although the intent was the same, Pollack's recommendation should negotiations with Iran fail is to

pursue a policy of containment while Kroenig argues for a limited military strike. The reasons the authors reach different conclusions stem from their assessment of Iran's motivations and incentives, as well as their perception of the consequences to the United States of several of the options. These differences are reflected in how the authors choose to compare the options and how they weigh the costs and benefits.

The authors conducted their analyses at approximately the same time. Kenneth Pollack's *Unthinkable* was published in September 2013, and Matthew Kroenig's *A Time to Attack* was published less than a year later in May 2014. Based on their expertise as practitioners and academics, the authors arrive at different recommendations for US policy makers on the best course. They are not the only experts to have conducted analysis or written about this important topic, nor do they represent the breadth of the Iran strategy debate. Yet a comparison of their methods provides an interesting case study in the field of foreign policy analysis. Comparing these similar works helps focus on the roots of the differences between analyses.

This review focuses not on the strengths of the authors' conclusions in addressing the Iran nuclear crisis but rather on the ways in which these analyses are similar and where they differ. Although on a small scale, this is instructive in understanding whether differences between the works lie in the inputs or in the processes. In this case, not surprisingly, the answer is a little bit of both. Evaluating policy conclusions and recommendations, as well as rectifying differences between trusted experts, depend on this identification. In order to solve problems together, it is important to know if everyone is

speaking the same language.

These authors certainly do speak the same language, and they also share similar backgrounds, through which they have developed expertise in foreign policy and in Iranian issues in particular. Pollack began his career in 1988 as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst on Iran-Iraq military affairs. Pollack also served at the National Security Council, the National Defense University, and the Council on Foreign Relations. Pollack is currently a Senior Fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy within the Brookings Institution. Kroenig worked as a Graduate Fellow at the CIA in 2004 and has since served at the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Council of Foreign Relations, and the Atlantic Council. Currently, Kroenig is an Associate Professor and International Relations Field Chair in the Department of Government at Georgetown University.

The combination of practical and academic experience is evident in both books. Both authors have advised US leaders on strategic choices in the Middle East at critical times. Pollack was a key contributor to the CIA post-mortem on the Gulf War from 1990 to 1991. Kroenig describes being the most junior person in a briefing room at the Pentagon in 2011 with the responsibility to identify and explain to top military leaders the United States' options in addressing the Iranian nuclear program. These and other anecdotes reinforce the authors' individual approaches to presenting policy options, which is done so in a straightforward, conversational manner. As analysts, advisors, and teachers, both authors seek to clarify the issue, present relevant background, identify the options, and compare them. At nearly twice the length of Kroenig's work, Pollack's approach goes into greater detail

on the historical and cultural background and in the discussion of key points. Regardless, the intent of the works is the same. Both authors lay out the issue and the options and conduct a comprehensive analysis that leads them to their recommendations.

As mentioned, those recommendations differ, though not starkly. Overall, if negotiations fail, Pollack argues that a containment strategy toward a nuclear or near-nuclear Iran is less costly than war, while Kroenig concludes that a limited military strike is preferable to an extended containment and deterrence strategy. The time difference between publication dates, while not long, may explain some of the variation between the authors' recommendations. In September 2013, as Pollack's book was being published, Iran had just elected Hassan Rouhani, a relatively moderate, pro-Western candidate, as its president. Furthermore, just after Pollack's book was released, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, US Secretary of State John Kerry, and other P5+1 foreign ministers (United Kingdom, France, China, Russia, and Germany) began negotiations to address, among other things, Iran's nuclear program. Interaction among Iran, the United States, and other negotiating partners continued to gain traction, resulting in an initial agreement in December 2013 on the path forward. As Kroenig's book was released in May 2014, Iran and the P5+1 had conducted several rounds of talks and were beginning to draft a comprehensive agreement (ACA 2015).

Regardless of the warming relations, the authors agree on several key points. First, despite Iran's continued objections, both authors conclude its nuclear program is almost certainly defense-oriented and not peaceful. This assessment is tempered by the opaque nature of the current Iranian

regime, and both authors acknowledge that intelligence convincingly demonstrates a long-term Iranian interest in and pursuit of nuclear weapons. Second, the authors emphasize that they consider Iran to be a rational actor in its international affairs. Third, both authors point out that a negotiated resolution to the crisis, in which Iran's nuclear program would be limited or rolled back to the point of reducing their ability to quickly produce a nuclear weapon, is the best of all options, but they also agree that negotiations are not guaranteed to succeed. Given that the United States will probably face the choice between military action and a deterrence and containment campaign, a difficult choice at best, the authors argue for what they both believe is the least bad option.

Furthermore, Pollack and Kroenig frame the issue in generally the same way: given that Iran is very likely interested in nuclear weapons and an armed Iran would be detrimental to the United States, both lay out similar paths for the United States to take to prevent Iran from achieving its nuclear goal. However, given the advanced state of Iran's nuclear program and supply of nuclear material, several of the options, outlined below, will not likely be effective, and the choice between containment and military action is approaching quickly. Pollack states that Iran has already achieved a kind of breakout capacity because it has the uranium enrichment capability, technology, and expertise the country needs to reach its end goal. Both authors agree that, given the opportunity, Iran could produce adequate weapons-grade highly enriched uranium for at least one weapon within a matter of months. The real challenge is in the design, testing, and especially the delivery of a weapon, milestones that

remain months or years away, although Pollack and Kroenig disagree on the exact timelines.

The inputs and the framing of the issue in both analyses are largely similar, whereas the process of analysis highlights several differences, particularly in the identification and assessment of the options. For example, Pollack presents the ultimate decision as a choice between containment and war, implying that military options (including several he discusses) will be unacceptably violent, costly, and extended. Kroenig presents a few military options but recommends that the United States conduct a limited strike rather than acquiesce to a nuclear-armed Iran and commit to a long-term containment and deterrence campaign with no guarantee of success. The tone and presentation of their options embody the weight the authors placed on certain choices at the outset of the analysis, which is ultimately reflected in their comparison.

Kroenig is clear that his intention is to provide a systematic analysis of all the options to present the best, or least bad, option in case the negotiations fail to produce the intended result. In order to do so, he first reviews both the history of US-Iran relations and what the United States knows about the Iranian nuclear program. Kroenig identifies the key facilities and their importance to producing weapons. Kroenig then outlines his assessment of Iranian goals and intentions. Given this background, Kroenig discusses four major categories of options: (1) the nonstarters (covert operations, the Japanese model, and a Persian Spring), (2) diplomacy and sanctions, (3) US strategies if Iran were to produce weapons (deterrence and containment), and (4) military strikes. After eliminating the nonstarters and assuming diplomacy and sanctions do not prevent Iranian

weapons production, Kroenig compares deterrence and containment of a nuclear Iran versus bombing Iran, and he discusses the costs and benefits of each. Kroenig then represents the comparison by identifying US strategic goals and assessing whether deterrence and military strikes achieve these goals.

Pollack also begins by describing what US analysts know and do not know about the Iranian regime's goals, intentions, personalities, and calculations. With this understanding, Pollack describes the threats that could arise from a nuclear Iran as well as those that may not. Pollack then presents four paths the United States could take to try to prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon: (1) improving upon President Obama's Dual Track approach (or the carrot-and-stick method, as Pollack calls it), (2) supporting internal regime change, (3) allowing an Israeli strike, or (4) conducting US military operations. Although he argues that continuing the Dual Track approach is the best of all the options, he lays out the circumstances in which the others are more or less beneficial. Pollack then turns to what options for containment would look like if Iran did produce a nuclear weapon, arguing that the strongest argument for war is the impossibility of containment, and so whether containment is possible deserves a great deal of scrutiny. Finally, if the carrot-and-stick method fails, Pollack compares the costs of containing a nuclear Iran or launching a US military operation.

Each author chooses a slightly different set of options based on his perception of the threat, and both differences and overlaps are noticeable. Particularly, one of the options Pollack considers is a nonstarter for Kroenig (a Persian Spring or regime change), and an Israeli strike is out of

the question for both authors. As Pollack explains, “we need to recognize that the assumptions we make will inevitably dictate the policy (or policies) we prefer, because different policies only make sense based on specific assumptions” (2013, 110).

The differences in options studied could stem from the authors’ disagreement about the goals and intent of the Iranian leadership. Kroenig argues that Iran has made the “final decision” to build nuclear weapons and that after the cost of their progress to date, it would not make sense for Iran to stop “a screwdriver turn away” from the final product (2014, 39). On the other hand, Pollack finds value for Iran in both full-fledged nuclear weaponization as well as in very short breakout capability of weeks or months if necessary. Neither author believes that a nuclear Iran would immediately begin launching weapons if it were able to produce them, nor that it would give nuclear capability to terrorist groups despite its ongoing patronage of many of them. Pollack further argues that, since these most concerning scenarios are not plausible, a nuclear Iran is not quite the menace that others believe it would be. Pollack stresses that the United States is right to focus on weaponization—not breakout capacity—as the inviolable red line, as breakout capacity has already been achieved given Iran’s advanced nuclear program.

Additionally, one of Kroenig’s strongest arguments for a limited strike against Iran’s nuclear program,

should it cross the United States’ red line, is that a strike would reinforce the credibility of US threats, which he argues has been degraded by the drawn-out tension with Iran and other regional incidents. If the United States does not demonstrate its willingness to take military action and follow through on its promises once Iran obtains nuclear weapons, Kroenig argues that containment and deterrence of a nuclear Iran, as well as proliferation within the region, will be much more difficult. However, Pollack is more concerned about the optics of a military option in terms of the reaction of the international community and the American public. Without the right support for such an option, Pollack argues that the United States’ reputation as a competent leader would take a hit, especially if a military attack did not fully achieve its objectives.

Despite their differences, Kroenig and Pollack both provide in-depth and well-rounded insights into a critical policy choice. Significant uncertainty, a lack of accurate information, and the fear inherent in nuclear crises makes thoughtful decision-making related to the Iranian nuclear crisis difficult. Furthermore, because policies’ costs and benefits are often counted in blood and treasure, if they are able to be counted at all, options are impossible to compare objectively. However, as these books exemplify, the way options are presented can introduce subtle differences that significantly affect outcomes.

References

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