The public debate on the comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—achieved a legislative culmination point when the last Senatorial vote needed to sustain a Presidential Veto was assured. Intense political and policy analytic debate about the JCPOA will no doubt continue, as will legislative action aimed either to enhance it, to destroy it, or to ensure through multiple overlapping initiatives that U.S.-Iran relations remain adversarial.

This is not the place, and I am not the person, to review in detail the technical parameters of the agreement. I support it, and perhaps that colors what I suggest below. I was struck, however, by larger issues that lie behind the array of objections raised to the agreement. These larger issues are important in their own right, and neither the opponents nor the supporters of the agreement chose to air them. Instead, as one might expect in an intense public political fight over a complex arms control agreement, the sides fought the campaign in a series of tactical battles over particular provisions of the agreement, or particular problems that it does not address. That said, these larger issues ought to be of importance to those of us whose job it is to address them in our scholarly work. A bit more purchase on these problems might be of utility going forward.

Three general questions hover above the Iran nuclear debate: What is the purpose of arms control? What is the nature of war as a political tool? How does diplomacy work?

Many criticisms of the arrangement took the following form. “Iran is an adversary of the U.S., of Israel, and of the Arab states; it is prone to violence; it practices deceit. Therefore, why would one make any deals with it? We should not sign any arms control agreement that Iran would sign.” This view was not unknown during the Cold War. The main purpose of arms control, however, is to regulate the competition with one’s adversary. Why would you want to do this? Advocates suggested that one might seek two kinds of ‘stability’ in an arms control arrangement: crisis stability and arms race stability. The first aimed to make trigger fingers a bit less itchy in crisis; the second aimed to save a few bucks by avoiding the mutual construction of weapons that would in the end make neither party much better off, either weapons that probably would not work, or weapons that were simply superfluous. We probably had more success with the second than the first in the Cold War. Neither project was a huge success, but stability was the point.

One of our first principles here at SSP is that nuclear weapons are special. Anything you can do to limit superfluous numbers and/or constrain first strike incentives in crisis, is worth a bit of effort. You may fail. The Iran deal is especially juicy from a U.S. point of view because it helps ensure that Iran cannot become a nuclear weapons state for a decade or more. The JCPOA is a nonproliferation agreement, banning even the materials for a weapon for one party rather than limiting weapons for two, but it shares a similarity with traditional arms control because of the specificity of the limits on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure and the systematic attention to verification, as well as the fact that the U.S. and its partners must make some reciprocal concessions. Given that decision makers believe that the U.S. has important strategic interests in the greater Middle East, sustaining an ability to protect those interests without the risk of a nuclear explosion is a big gain. Those who believe that Iran is inevitably a committed adversary of the U.S. and a threat to the status quo, ought to be pleased that the U.S. has another decade of escalation dominance in the region. Moreover, lengthening the time that it would take Iran to ‘break out,’ to convert its nuclear energy program into a useable weapon, also contributes to crisis stability. Given how long it would take during the first fifteen years of the agreement, a sudden confrontation with the U.S. ought not to precipitate a rush to the exits, as a rush cannot quickly yield a weapon. Similarly, the U.S. need not consider a preventive strike early in any crisis, because it would have more time to assess the situation. This is a new kind of crisis stability.

A second important question looming over the debate is how to think about large-scale military action, what many of us still quaintly refer to as ‘war.’ The President, in his less reserved moments of advocacy, accused opponents of the agreement of driving the U.S. to war. His interlocutors bridled at the accusation, though as I will suggest below, he was on firm ground. The accusation of moving us to war did not however, seem to produce much consideration of what a war might look like. When pressed senior commanders asserted their confidence in the ability of the U.S. military to handle Iran, and its nuclear energy program. And in an arithmetical sense, this is surely true. The U.S. has the aircraft and precision munitions (PGMs) to destroy whatever targets we know about, and given the 70 or 80 billion dollars we spend each year on intelligence of all sorts, we probably know about a lot of targets. This is, however, only the beginning of an assessment. PGMs can only destroy identified targets, and a few have probably escaped detection. Even explosions proximate to known targets do not always do the damage that is expected. The adversary occasionally moves a few important things before a strike. A few bits and pieces of the program would likely survive. But the most important thing about the Iranian program is that it lives in the minds of its scientists, engineers, and technicians. Unless many of them are killed, the program will have a tendency to grow back. Though a small number of Iranian scientists have been assassinated by someone, one seldom hears this larger scale remedy discussed, because to discuss it would raise profound political and indeed ethical issues, and actually to do it would be even more problematical. Advocates of a strike take refuge in the Israeli saying that you just have to keep coming back to “mow the lawn.” Is it a viable course for U.S. foreign policy to bomb another country every five years until it concedes that we determine its policies?

Beyond the necessarily limited decisiveness of a strike on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure is everything else one dimly knows about war. Our own soldiers often remind us that “the enemy gets a vote.” Iran can choose to retaliate at
the moment, or nurse its grudge. It can use ‘conventional weapons’ or it can use sabotage and subversion. It can reach for immediate large impact strikes with ballistic missiles, anti ship missiles, and mines, or it can dribble out their strikes, aiming to keep the region roiled for a long time. Its air defense system can turn on its radars, fire all its surface to air missiles, and hope to bring down many U.S. aircraft, or they can play cat and mouse, like the Serbs did, prolonging the campaign. Iranian strikes will not close the Gulf nor cut off Saudi oil shipments, (as analysis done here at SSP has shown), but questions still arise. What if Iran gets lucky? What are the knock-on economic and political effects of even modest Iranian success? It is a staple of Iran threat assessment to discuss its proxies in the region. I doubt that these proxies would take big risks for Iran, but they might help Iran spread the pain and prolong the war. The U.S. now has more than 3500 advisors in Iraq, in close proximity to Shiite militias with good relations with Iranian intelligence; they are not invulnerable. These kinds of Iranian responses will not defeat the U.S., but they impose costs. Finally, how will the war be brought to an end? What remedies would the U.S. have if Iran simply refused to end hostilities?

War has other costs that are more difficult to demonstrate and measure-- political costs. The U.S. is already part of modern Iran’s history; the story they tell themselves about the U.S. role in their history helps the regime to rally political support. It sustains the commitment of its more ardent military defenders. A U.S. war against Iran would further entrench the politics of that country in favor of enduring competition. One ought not to be too sure how sustained western air attacks on Iran would be taken across the region. Arab regimes oppose the Iranian regime and would probably applaud. Not all Arab people would feel the same. Shiite Arabs would likely sympathize with Iran. We should remember, however, that at the outset of the insurgency against the U.S. in Iraq, Sunni and Shiite Arab fighters made common cause against us.

Finally, a peculiar view of diplomacy emerged in some criticisms of the agreement. As typically practiced, diplomacy is about compromise. Coalitional diplomacy is also about give and take among one’s own sovereign partners, who may not all have identical interests. Much of the criticism of the Iran agreement challenges the very notion of diplomacy. This is not unusual in the U.S.: even senior diplomats sometimes fall prey to the assumption that diplomacy is about the U.S. giving another country or leader a chance to surrender gracefully, before we crush them. Think back to our negotiations with Milosevic over Kosovo, or with Gaddafi or Assad. As these cases suggest, however, even actors much weaker than Iran do not view diplomacy as a surrender ceremony. Criticisms of the Iran nuclear agreement to the effect that it leaves Iran with enrichment capability, or that it returns to them financial resources that we have impounded, is essentially a criticism of diplomacy. Iran needed to be offered something to get it to constrain a program in which it had invested significant financial, human, and political capital. The agreement turned off much of the physical plant of Iran’s enrichment effort and constrains its growth for many years; most of its enriched uranium is surrendered; all of its physical plant is subjected to regular and intense scrutiny. For the duration of the agreement, Iran lives under the institutionalized threat of sanctions renewal in the event that it defects. The wider ramifications of the agreement also give each side something important. Iran gets to focus on its internal economic problems; the U.S. gets to practice hegemony in the greater Middle East without worrying much about nuclear risks.

U.S. diplomacy also needed to account for the interests of its own negotiating partners. Skeptics claim that the alternative to this deal “is a better deal.” It is more likely that, as the President suggested, the alternative to this deal is war. Why is that? The President knew what the New York Times only reported in early September: Russia, China, France, Britain, and Germany helped make the sanctions regime so onerous that Iran saw an interest in cutting a deal. The “better deal” that some think could be achieved would only be possible if the sanctions regime could be sustained indefinitely. In August, representatives of these countries sat down with undecided members of Congress to convey the message that they wanted a deal now, and that they would not continue to cooperate with the sanctions regime if the U.S. scotched it. Without their help, there is not enough pressure to get a better deal. The U.S. could of course try to pressure its partners to remain in the sanctions regime. But there is no guarantee that this would work, since these are all major economic powers themselves, and they have declared their interest in the settlement. Efforts to pressure them into sustaining sanctions would likely cost the U.S. something, in terms of side-payments and ill-will. Even if pressure worked, Iran could doubt the cohesion of such a fractious coalition. One way or the other, U.S. economic and/or political leverage on Iran would probably weaken. Iran would then likely resume work on improving the capabilities of its nuclear infrastructure; and the U.S. would be out of cooperative options to constrain it. Thus, the President’s argument that to abandon this deal is to raise the risk of war was fair.

Nuclear Arms Control is no panacea to an otherwise intense strategic competition, but given the risks posed by nuclear weapons, should we prefer to proceed without negotiation? War is sometimes a necessary tool, but it is more battle axe than rapier. If one plans to impose by force certain policies on a country with nearly 80 million nationalistic citizens, in an inherently unstable part of the world, does it make sense to assume that there will be a cheap and decisive outcome? Finally, ought one to expect diplomacy to be a surrender negotiation in the absence of victory in a bloody and destructive war? These are general questions that should affect not only the foreign policy of the U.S., but foreign policy period. We could do a better job answering these questions. But perhaps we could also do a better job explaining their importance to the wider public.