

Iran: Confrontation, Containment, or Compromise

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On the walls surrounding what once was the U.S. Embassy compound in south-central Tehran, one of the cruder slogans made infamous by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini remained emblazoned only a few years ago: ‘America cannot do a damn thing.’ At the time, an effort to reform Iran’s Islamic system was on the ascendance, and the fading street propaganda seemed a relic of the heady atmosphere and tragic miscalculations that transpired as a result of the 1979 revolution. Today, both Khomeini’s words and the aura of triumphal defiance they reflected have been revived by an Iranian leadership that sees itself as empowered and invulnerable to adversaries at home or in the region.

For Washington, it is a return to painfully familiar territory. Over the past thirty years, dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran represents one of America’s most durable strategic dilemmas. Since the first rumblings of the Islamic Revolution, the U.S. has struggled to develop an enduringly effective approach to Iran. A patchwork policy—comprised mainly of comprehensive economic sanctions, episodic international cooperation, and the threat (and sporadic use) of military force—has succeeded in containing the array of serious strategic challenges posed by Iran. However, a conclusive resolution to Iranian antagonism and the threat posed to U.S. interests has eluded successive American administrations.

After a flirtation with regime change in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein’s ouster, the cur-

rent Bush administration in its second term sought to address comprehensively the multiple issues of U.S. concern, including Iran’s nuclear ambitions, its bankrolling of terrorism, its bid to fill the “huge power vacuum” in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its repression of its own citizenry. The second-term Bush strategy was intended to present Iranian leaders with a stark choice between moderation or isolation, and for a period Washington enjoyed unprecedented success in persuading a wide coalition of allies and international actors to support its efforts. Iran itself contributed greatly to uniting the world against it, by virtue of its leaders’ appalling rhetoric and its encroaching influence across the region.

Nonetheless, the latest U.S. approach to Iran has borne little fruit. Tehran balked at demands for suspending its uranium enrichment program in exchange for talks, instead its nuclear program has advanced with alacrity, and its influence in Iraq and Afghanistan appears undiminished. Despite efforts to put Tehran on the defensive around the region and Washington’s defense relationships with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Iranian leaders enjoy considerable popularity even on the historically hostile Arab street as well as the reluctant tactical accommodation of their governments. High oil prices have absorbed the financial costs and potential political implications associated with new sanctions. Moreover, the regional environment has helped hard-line

Iranian conservatives consolidate their control over all the levers of state power.

The View From Tehran

Taming Tehran will require a far more informed and nuanced understanding of the dynamics that shape its decision-making than the current U.S. administration has demonstrated for the simple reason that it is almost impossible to influence a regime without some appreciation of what drives its policies and choices. Iran's ruling system is the product of its revolution—a competing, multi-pronged beast that incorporates a wide array of aims, interests, and actors. At every point in the regime's history, its leadership has engaged in fratricidal partisanship. Even Khomeini, whose charismatic authority was almost undisputed, could not enforce obedience to his every mandate within the regime, and the ferocity of factional disputes has only intensified since his 1989 death. The contested internal political battlefield shapes all policy outcomes in Iran. At the same time, no single individual wields complete or uncontested power. Iran's multiple spheres of influence, jockeying political factions, and semi-autonomous institutions make it virtually impossible for any political actor to move absent broad buy-in. This is the hidden strength of the system, as well as the source of its opacity, inconsistency, and inefficiency.

Iranian leadership operates from within a worldview that is fundamentally conflicted, hence the schizophrenia that is evident in both its rhetoric and its actions. Tehran sees itself as besieged from all directions by Washington—a product of both its deeply engrained paranoia as well as actual facts on the ground. At the same time, Iranian leaders—in particular President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—are buoyed by a sense of confidence, even arrogance, about the country's domestic and regional status. What this bifurcated view of the world translates to in practice is a tendency to equate assertiveness as equivalent to, or an effective substitute for, power—both in internal politics and in foreign policy. This Hobbesian

worldview encourages adventurism and discourages compromise. Molded by their perception of an inherently hostile world and the conviction that the exigencies of regime survival justify its actions, Iranian leaders seek to exploit every opening, pursue multiple or contradictory agendas, play various capitals against one another, and engage in pressure tactics—including the limited use of force—to advance their interests. Tehran's power projection reflects a basic opportunism, seeking to maximize avenues of influence and exploit its adversaries' vulnerabilities.

Nonetheless, at its basic conception Iranian foreign policy is fundamentally pragmatic. Ideology matters, but only so far. Every Iranian leader has routinely sacrificed revolutionary and religious orthodoxy in service of more mundane national, personal, or regime-survival interests. Suspicion of U.S. government motives and actions remains visceral and deeply engrained among the Islamic Republic's senior leaders, but today, Israel remains the sole sacred cow of the theocracy's foreign policy—the only issue where dogma dictates policy—and that is as much a function of domestic politics as ideological fervor. Despite the prevailing perceptions and its leadership's relentless sloganeering, Iran and its policies are not immutable. In response to changing internal conditions and regional circumstances, Iranian foreign policy has evolved considerably over the years. This evolution continues even as the domestic environment has regressed, for example with the unprecedented 2006 endorsement by Iran's supreme leader of dialogue with Washington—a position that only a few years before risked a prison term when voiced by dissidents.

Confrontation

This framework for the Iranian political sphere underscores why a resort to military force would represent the worst of all possible approaches to dealing with the array of challenges posed by Tehran. The reality is that we simply do not have a viable military option available to us that would generate a better outcome

for our interests across the Middle East. A military conflict with Tehran would significantly harm all of our security objectives in the region. With respect to the nuclear program, force is not likely to provide an effective solution. Iranian leaders learned from Iraq's Osirak experience (an Iraqi nuclear reactor that was bombed by Israel in 1981 and later fully destroyed by U.S. aircraft in the 1991 Gulf War), and as a result their nuclear installations are hardened, dispersed, and located near population centers. Moreover, given the failures of American intelligence in Iraq, there is little reason for confidence that any American air campaign would conclusively or permanently incapacitate Iran's nuclear program.

Whatever limited benefits in terms of delaying Iran's capacity to cross the nuclear threshold by a handful of years would be overwhelmingly offset by a wide range of negative consequences. A strike would galvanize Iran's profoundly nationalistic population, and thoroughly consolidate public support for their unpopular government—including its nuclear ambitions. The regime's retaliatory reach would be felt throughout the region, particularly by American allies, and the aftermath would almost surely doom any prospects for revitalizing the peace process or wresting a stable outcome from Iraq. The sole beneficiaries from a military conflict between Washington and Tehran would be the forces of radical anti-Americanism throughout the Islamic world. For this reason, many of America's closest regional partners have long viewed the consequences of an attack on Iran as more threatening than the obvious dangers of a nuclear Iran.

The November 2007 National Intelligence Assessment on Iran's nuclear program has left a thorny legacy for future policymakers if they contemplate military action as a means of thwarting Tehran's nuclear ambitions. While the report did not—as some media accounts suggested—acquit Iran of seeking a nuclear weapon, the conclusion that Tehran had shelved its weapons design efforts significantly complicates the case for the military option,

both with fence-sitters in the international communities and among a war-weary American public and political class. Threatening military action under these circumstances makes a mockery of American credibility.

Beyond the nuclear issue, the regional environment obviously presents fertile ground for confrontation between Tehran and Washington. American troops are present along each of Iran's lengthy borders, and Tehran's forceful assertion of its influence in Iraq and Afghanistan has long cultivated concerns that a direct military encounter could easily escalate beyond either side's original intentions. In both countries, Tehran has played a dual role—first and foremost through an extensive official relationship with the formal governments in Kabul and Baghdad, and secondly through support to insurgents in Iraq as a means of maximizing its own position within the country and leverage vis-à-vis Washington and protecting its allies in the event of full-fledged civil war. From Tehran's vantage point, the regime has an existential interest in ensuring a friendly government in Baghdad, one that is no longer capable of threatening Iran directly or on behalf of the international community. This focus is a product of the 1980-88 war, which inculcated a persistent sense of strategic vulnerability and a willingness to do whatever is necessary to ensure the survival of both the Iranian nation and the Islamic state.

Over the past year, Washington has moved more forcefully against Iranian activities within Iraq, but the rarity of direct or sustained clashes between American troops and Iranian agents speaks to the powerful disincentives for all sides in expanding the battlefield. Iran is a considerable part of the problem in Iraq, but its leadership ultimately shares a broad interest in Iraqi stability with Washington and Baghdad, and recent developments in Basra demonstrate its value as a mediator. Moreover, the real means of protecting Iraq's sovereignty from intrusive neighbors does not involve expanding U.S. presence and responsibility within the country. In the long term, Iraqi leaders will only begin to dif-

ferentiate themselves from Tehran when they are forced to grapple independently with the painful alternatives of governing and assume greater responsibility for their country's security.

Nonetheless, the next Administration is very likely to revisit the dilemma of coercive discourse as a way of dissuading Iran from its current course and persuading American allies to utilize their leverage with Tehran. Washington needs to consider carefully the impact of American rhetoric on Iran's internal political dynamics. It is not clear that the vague references to American willingness to use force carry significant credibility in Tehran given the logistical and policy constraints that stem from our involvements elsewhere in the region. Moreover, embellished by references to "World War Three" and "nuclear holocaust" by the American president, such rhetoric serves only to strengthen Iranian hard-liners and reinforce the most paranoid fears of a leadership already steeped in suspicion of American motives and objectives. For all those Iranian political actors, such as Ahmadinejad, who have dismissed the possibility of a U.S. military strike on the country, there are others from each end of the political spectrum who have expressed fears that a desperate Washington might attack Iran to vindicate and/or extricate itself from its failed intervention in Iraq.

The same dire caveats should apply to any consideration of externally-orchestrated regime change. The Islamic Republic is unpopular at home, but Iran remains far away from any revolutionary change. Rampant popular dissatisfaction has yet to evolve into organized opposition, and there is no coherent challenge to the system. Dissidents who leave Iran are inherently and often unhappily irrelevant, and permanent expatriates can only be bystanders to Iran's ever-evolving political dynamics. The vast majority of Iranians grudgingly accept the system, and all its flaws, finding it preferable to uncertainty and/or chaos. More importantly, however, given Iran's generalized antipathy toward "external intervention" and specifically the legacy of the Mossadeq era (when the CIA helped organize a

coup in 1953 that led to the ouster of then Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq and reinstated the shah), any suggestion of American involvement with Iran's internal politics would undoubtedly taint all concerned, and further entrench the current regime.

Compromise

Understanding the Iranian political sphere also helps illuminate why diplomatic engagement is an appropriate and potentially effective tool for addressing our deep differences with Tehran. Understandably, as Iran's politics have shifted in a more radical right-wing direction, the appeal of engagement might seem to have diminished even to those who advocated it during the brief advent of a reformist president and parliament during the late 1990s. However, the most legitimate argument for engaging with Iran was never predicated on the relative palatability of our potential interlocutors, but on the seriousness of the differences between our governments and the centrality of the U.S. interests at stake. The international reprobation aimed at Ahmadinejad and his clique is well earned, and yet it is ultimately an insufficient excuse for constraining our own tools for dealing with Tehran. The aim of diplomacy is to advance interests, not to make friends or endorse enemies.

Engagement with Iran is not an automatic path to rapprochement, nor should it imply a unilateral offer of a 'grand bargain.' Rather it would entail a return to the long-held American position that we are prepared to talk with Iranian leaders, in a serious and sustained way, in any authoritative dialogue as a means of addressing the profound concerns that its policies pose for U.S. interests and allies. This was in fact the standing policy of every American administration, including the Bush Administration, prior to 2003, when in the early exhilaration of the Iraqi invasion the decision was made to curtail two years of constructive official dialogue with Iran over Afghanistan.

If we are to be effective, engaging Iran can-

not be left to happenstance; rather, it should incorporate the development of a diplomatic process for making progress on the discrete but complex array of issues at stake, including identifying a persuasive set of incentives and disincentives that might be proffered by both sides and the designation of an authorized and empowered negotiator. One possible mechanism worth pursuing derives from a 2004 Council on Foreign Relations Task Force chaired by former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, serving at the time as president of Texas A&M University. The Task Force recommended outlining a basic statement of principles, along the lines of the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué signed by the United States and China, to provide the parameters for U.S.-Iranian engagement and establish the overarching objectives for dialogue.

In committing U.S. policy to engagement with Tehran, we must recognize that the ideal opportunity for dealing with Tehran will never come. Timing matters in negotiations, and the concern about the impact of regional dynamics is justifiable, but to avoid diplomatic interface because of a perceived power imbalance is effectively to consign the countries to permanent antagonism. Our interest in addressing the challenges posed by Iran cannot be deferred until we have achieved the most conducive regional balance of power, or until Iran has finally elected the most amenable array of leaders. The objective of American policy must be to create the grounds for progress with Iran even if the Iranian internal environment remains hostile or the regional context continues to present challenges.

Engaging with the Iranian regime does not imply forsaking our vocal commitment to criticizing Tehran's abuses of its citizens' rights. We can and should speak out in favor of greater social, political, and economic liberalization in Iran, and we should press vigorously against the regime's repression—greatly increased in recent years—of dissidents, activists and stu-

dents. In lieu of our high-profile, low-impact democracy program—which has alienated the very dissidents and activists it was intended to support—we should dramatically expand opportunities for Iranians to interact with the rest of the world through exchange programs, scholarships and enhanced access to visas.

Containment

In the absence of better diplomatic or military options, Washington inevitably reverts to containment, the default American approach toward Tehran. It is undoubtedly a second-best strategy, as it falls short of providing a conclusive resolution of the Iranian challenge; however, containment promises the considerable virtue of being an achievable aim of U.S. policy. By rebalancing U.S. security relationships with the Persian Gulf states, and giving priority to some sustainable posture in Iraq leading to an exit strategy from that country, Washington can check Iran's capacity for regional troublemaking and begin to shift the burden of any future sectarian instability onto Tehran.

Effective containment of Iran must begin in the Persian Gulf, not with the sort of massive arms package that was the Bush administration's recent response to regional uncertainty, but with a serious effort to work with the Gulf states to shape a framework for long-term regional security. A key dimension of this effort must be articulating a credible vision for an inevitably downsized U.S. role in Iraq as a means of building confidence among America's Iraqi partners and regional allies. Financial pressures against Iran can also play a role well beyond their relatively minimal economic cost to Tehran, by heralding the creeping return to isolation of a proud people. No one should be under any illusions that financial measures will quickly or decisively alter the leadership's calculus. As part of a patient strategy of seeking diplomatic openings, however, sanctions can affect the balance of competing views within the Iranian regime.

Conclusion

In January 2009, President Bush's successor will confront these choices on how best to manage the Iranian challenge, with even less time available to forestall Iran's crossing of the nuclear threshold. The change in U.S. administrations may present a brief window of opportunity, but ultimately the complexity and intractability of Iran policy means that there will be no quick fixes

or silver bullets. Ultimately, we will have to utilize multiple instruments and approaches to contend with a newly ascendant Iran—containment, active deterrence, and even accommodation and engagement. The challenge for the next Administration will be to fashion an approach that transcends the historic legacy, reshapes the regional environment, and regains the strategic advantage to create a path for a permanent resolution of U.S.-Iranian hostilities.