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COPING WITH A NUCLEARIZING IRAN

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Cover photos (clockwise from top left): Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (AP/Hasan Sarbakhshian); President Barack Obama (AP/Carolyn Kaster); Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (AP/Hasan Sarbakhshian); Revolutionary Guard’s Tondar missile is launched in a drill (AP/Fars News Agency, Ali Shaigan).

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It is not inevitable that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons or that it will gain the capacity to quickly produce them. American and even Israeli analysts continually push their estimates for such an event further into the future. Nevertheless, absent a change in Iranian policy, it is reasonable to assume that, some time in the coming decade, Iran will acquire such a capability. Western policymakers shy away from addressing this prospect, lest they seem to be acquiescing to something they deem unacceptable and want to prevent. But there is a big difference between acknowledging and accepting another’s behavior. It is unacceptable that Iran should even be seeking nuclear weapons in violation of its treaty commitments, yet the U.S. government nevertheless acknowledges that Iran is doing so because that admission is a necessary prerequisite to effectively addressing the problem.

Most recent scholarly studies have also focused on how to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Other, less voluminous writing looks at what to do after Iran becomes a nuclear power. What has so far been lacking is a policy framework for dealing with Iran before, after, and, indeed, during its crossing of the nuclear threshold. Herein, we try to fill that gap by providing a midterm strategy for dealing with Iran that neither begins nor ends at the point at which Tehran acquires a nuclear weapon capability. We propose an approach that neither acquiesces to a nuclear-armed Iran nor refuses to admit the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—of this occurring.
U.S. Objectives

The United States has three main objectives with respect to Iran: restraining its external behavior, moderating its domestic politics, and reversing its nuclear weapon program. U.S. policy should be designed to advance all three goals. Progress toward any one objective would probably help advance the others, or at least make their achievement less urgent. Yet there are also tensions between the three objectives, or at least between the policies intended to advance them. Containment isolates Iranian reformists, as well as the repressive elements of Iranian society. Sanctions help rally public opinion around the regime and increase popular support for its nuclear ambitions. U.S. efforts to promote political reform are used by the regime both to justify repression and to discredit the opposition.

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, containment of Iranian external influence has been the dominant U.S. objective regarding Iran, accompanied by occasional efforts at engagement and limited bouts of armed conflict. Isolating Iran was relatively easy as long as the country faced hostile adversaries to both east and west. It was Iraqi misbehavior, not Iranian, that first brought U.S. ground and air forces into the Persian Gulf in 1990 and has kept them there ever since. The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq replaced regimes hostile to both Iran and the United States with ones friendly to both. With these two adversaries eliminated, Iran and the United States began to identify each other as the dominant challenge.

Iranian Objectives

Iran and the United States both have substantial reasons for their mutual antipathy. Iranian grievances go back to the U.S. role in overthrowing Iran’s democratically elected government in 1953, followed by Washington’s backing of the shah for the next 26 years, and then U.S. support for Saddam Hussein’s war of aggression against Iran, during which the U.S. Navy shot down an Iranian civil airliner over international waters in the Persian Gulf. U.S. grievances began with
the seizure of the U.S. embassy and the holding hostage of its staff in 1979, followed by Iranian links to terrorist attacks on U.S. forces in Beirut in 1983 and in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and Iranian support for extremist movements in Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In the past decade, however, Iran’s nuclear program has emerged as the dominant U.S. concern. Most recently, Iran’s alleged involvement in terrorist attacks on Saudi and Israeli targets in the United States adds yet a new source of conflict.

The anti-American and anti-Israeli elements of Iranian policy have historical and ideological roots, but they are also geopolitically instrumental, offering the regime a means of going over the heads of hostile Arab governments to directly influence their populations. Iran has no modern history of military aggression and only limited capabilities to threaten its neighbors militarily. It is not, however, the Iranian military that its neighbors fear most, but rather the Islamic Republic’s appeal to its neighbors’ populations as the ideological bastion of anti-American, anti-Israeli, and pro-Shi’a sentiment; as the patron of Arab rejectionist forces; and as a source of funding, advice, and arms for insurgent and extremist groups.

Iran’s odd combination of theocracy and elected institutions has produced generally cautious and pragmatic behavior at the state-to-state level, combined with the use of subversion, terrorism, propaganda, ideology, and religion to undermine neighboring regimes it regards as adversaries. Conservative and reformist governments have sometimes sought to emphasize the overt and more positive strain of Iranian policy, but the security establishment and the religious leadership have never been willing to entirely abandon the darker tools of statecraft. Iran continues to sponsor and train terrorist and insurgent groups throughout the Middle East. Controversy in Iran over the results of the 2009 Iranian presidential election have strengthened this latter, more fundamentalist faction, consolidating the power of the Revolutionary Guards and the position of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as the final arbiter of Iranian policy. As long as these forces remain dominant, there is little prospect of overcoming the many differences that divide the United States and Iran, least of all that of Iran’s nuclear program.
International Reactions

Arab regimes, particularly the smaller Persian Gulf monarchies, have responded to Iranian behavior with a mixture of fear and caution, looking to the United States for protection while keeping open lines of communication with Tehran and often avoiding too open an alignment with Washington, most notably on the Iranian nuclear program.

Europe, for its part, was reluctant to embrace George W. Bush’s early emphasis on preemption as a response to nuclear proliferation. As Bush in his second term and then Barack Obama tempered this bellicose rhetoric, the major European powers began to align themselves more closely with Washington’s efforts to employ mounting sanctions to stem the Iranian nuclear program. Russia and China have done likewise, albeit more cautiously.

Regional states and global powers are currently fairly united in opposing the Iranian nuclear program, but few do so with the concentration that marks U.S. policy. For most other governments, Israel aside, its nuclear program is one consideration regarding Iran among many. The Obama administration has, nevertheless, been quite successful in securing broad international support for sanctions on Iran. Most major European countries and U.S. allies have acceded to international sanctions against Iran and have curtailed business ties with the Islamic Republic. This coalition remains fragile, however, and probably cannot be led too much further absent some new Iranian provocation.

Regional governments are more worried about Iranian subversion than Iranian invasion. Most are equally as antipathetic to U.S. aspirations for their political evolution as they are to Iranian, rejecting as they do both models of governance. The Arab monarchies of the Gulf will likely resist the domestic reforms that offer the best antidote to Iranian influence, and they will offer little support for U.S. efforts to encourage Iranian democracy.

The Iranian leadership professes to believe that the Arab Spring will ultimately redound to Iran’s benefit. Other observers feel that it is the United States that will gain influence as the result of democratization in the region. Perhaps the more likely result is a loss of influence for both Iran and the United States.
Iran has nothing to offer the democratizing Arab societies, either as a model or a source of assistance. Tehran’s main source of leverage in the Arab world has been its capacity to undermine the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes linked to Washington and, by association, to Israel. Popularly based Arab regimes will reduce those links and therefore be less vulnerable to that kind of criticism. They will be less dependent on the United States, less friendly to Israel, and consequently less vulnerable to Iranian propaganda. They might become less hostile to Tehran but will also be less concerned about its ability to appeal directly to their publics.

The Gulf monarchies regard the Arab Spring as a threat to their own stability. This will increase their fear of the ideological challenge posed not just by Iran but also by democratizing Arab states and U.S. support for that process. These regimes will thus become more wary in their relations with both Tehran and Washington.

Syria might be an exception to this pattern of regional distancing both from Tehran and Washington. A more popularly based regime in Damascus would probably loosen its ties to Tehran while strengthening relations with the United States. This might prove a real regional game changer.

**U.S. Instruments of Influence**

The United States will be able to exert only a modest level of influence on Iran in the short and medium terms. U.S. diplomatic leverage is constrained by the bitter history of U.S.-Iranian relations and the domestic legitimacy the regime derives from defying the United States. The 2009 Iranian presidential election and the resulting divisions among political elites and within Iranian society at large have made the Islamic Republic even less susceptible to direct U.S. diplomatic influence, although these events also make Iran more vulnerable to U.S. economic leverage and soft power. The regime’s conservative and principlist decisionmakers, ascendant in the postelection period, are unlikely to be swayed by U.S. efforts at engagement. Their repression and extremism, on the other hand, make it easier for the United
States to rally international pressure against them, while their domestic opposition is clearly looking outside Iran for inspiration, if not material support.

U.S. and international sanctions against Iran, particularly United Nations (UN) resolution 1929 (2010) and the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA) (Pub. L. 111-195, 2010), have significantly undermined Iran’s economy and widened divisions within the regime. Even if these sanctions have little effect on Iranian policy, they very substantially degrade Iranian economic and military capability and thus limit the regime’s capacity to project power and influence—a long-standing objective of U.S. policy.

Intelligence operations offer an opportunity to pay back the Iranian regime in its own coin. The Stuxnet computer virus attack on Natanz and the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, which some have attributed to Israeli intelligence agencies,¹ might have slowed the nuclear program and possibly helped bring Iran to the negotiation table in 2010–2011. However, such covert actions are used by the Iranian regime to justify more repression, and they probably also intensify its resolve to continue with the nuclear program.

The Iranian populace is more susceptible to U.S. influences on cultural and social matters than to Washington’s views on foreign and security policy. Iran’s drive in becoming economically, technologically, and militarily self-sufficient hinders U.S. economic and diplomatic leverage on the nuclear program. As a revolutionary state, the Islamic Republic is willing to absorb a significant amount of pain and isolation in order to achieve “independence,” regional power, and prestige. However, the regime will not be able to stifle indefinitely popular demands for a more democratic, accountable, and open political system. Consistent U.S. support for these values, espoused across the region and not just targeted at Iran, offers the best hope of eventually achieving all three of the United States’s prime objectives.

¹ Broad, Markoff, and Sanger, 2011.
Policy Alternatives

Competing U.S. approaches toward Iran might be characterized as engagement versus containment, preemption versus deterrence, and normalization versus regime change. In effect, these are competing archetypes, offering three policy spectrums from which actual courses of action can be chosen. Since much of the policy debate in the United States turns around these archetypes, it is useful to examine how each might meet basic U.S. objectives before turning to a possible synthesis.

A policy of pure engagement would emphasize the use of diplomacy to resolve differences while seeking to increase travel, cultural exchanges, and commerce between the United States and Iran. Such a policy is unlikely to advance U.S. objectives as long as the principlists and Revolutionary Guards remain ascendant in Tehran.

By contrast, a policy of pure containment would employ defensive alliances, sanctions, and noncommunication to isolate and penalize Iran. Such an approach can achieve the objective of restraining Iran’s external behavior, but it works against the goal of reforming its domestic politics, and it increases popular, as well as regime, support for the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Preemption goes beyond mere containment to include an offensive threat or use of military force to forestall some unwanted development—in Iran’s case, the acquisition of a nuclear weapon capability. Such an approach could slow Iran’s nuclear program, but it would strengthen both external sympathy and internal support for the regime, as well as probably accelerating its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Containing Iran’s regional influence would therefore become more difficult in the aftermath of a military strike.

Deterrence, by contrast, would employ the threat of retaliation to dissuade Iran from employing nuclear weapons to influence, coerce, or damage others. Such a policy is a necessary companion to containment should Iran cross the nuclear threshold. If deterrence is not accompanied by a greater level of engagement, however, the risk of uncontrolled escalation is high.

Normalization would involve mutual diplomatic recognition, exchange of ambassadors, and the opening of embassies. Given that
Iran already has diplomats stationed in both New York and Washing-
ton, it is the United States that would have the most to gain from
the resumption of diplomatic relations. For this reason, among others,
there is no prospect of such a development anytime soon.

Pure regime change, on the other hand, would involve the use
of overt and covert efforts to delegitimize and destabilize the Iranian
regime. Although the goal might be eminently desirable, most of the
possible methods to achieve it would be likely to yield the opposite
effect, perpetuating the current regime and strengthening its more-
extreme elements.

Thus, none of these approaches, taken in isolation, offers the pros-
pect of advancing all three of the United States’s main objectives. Pure
engagement will get nowhere with the current Iranian regime. Con-
tainment constrains only Iran’s external behavior. Preemption deals
only with the nuclear issue, and then only temporarily, while making
progress toward the other two objectives more difficult. Deterrence is
an appropriate complement to containment but, again, affects only
Iran’s external behavior. Neither normalization nor regime change is
an attainable short-term objective.

Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran

Theoretically, the spectrum of possible Iranian nuclear capability runs
from no program, civil or military, at one end, to a growing arsenal of
tested weapons and long-range delivery systems at the other. Although
the United States and much of the rest of the world would like to con-
fine the Iranian program to the lowest possible level, there is strong
support within Iran, across the political spectrum, within and without
the government, for full mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle and, possibly,
growing support within the populace for acquiring nuclear weapons.

The closer Iran moves toward testing and deploying nuclear
weapons, the more negative the consequences for regional and global
security. Uncertainty regarding Iran’s actual capacity—although itself
a source of anxiety—would be less provocative than certainty about
such a capacity. The region has lived with an unacknowledged Israeli
nuclear arsenal since the late 1960s and could conceivably do the same with a similarly discreet Iranian capacity. Better yet would be a certainty, derived from intrusive verification measures, that Iran, although capable of manufacturing nuclear weapons, had not actually done so. Worst of all would be a situation in which Iran had openly breached the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (also known as the Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT), tested and deployed nuclear weapons, and begun to articulate a doctrine for their use. This latter situation would be the most likely to prompt other states to go down this same path while maximizing the levels of tension and anxiety among regional governments and populations.

Current U.S. policy is to offer an easing of sanctions only if Iran agrees to roll back its nuclear program by abandoning enrichment. There is no support for such a step anywhere on the Iranian political spectrum and, therefore, little prospect that this objective can be attained. We therefore recommend that the United States move toward a set of graduated objectives, seeking in the short term to dissuade Iran from actually testing and deploying nuclear weapons, while retaining the leverage necessary to eventually secure full Iranian compliance with its NPT obligations.

Iran is seeking nuclear weapons for some combination of security, influence, and prestige. Persuading the Iranian leadership that renouncing the NPT and building, testing, and deploying nuclear weapons will increase its isolation, diminish its influence, and confirm its pariah status is the best way of dissuading the regime from crossing that threshold. This effort at persuasion cannot really begin until the United States acknowledges that the Iranian program probably will not be reversed and thus commences preparations to deal with the consequences.

An all-or-nothing U.S. approach, one that insists on full rollback of enrichment before any easing of sanctions can take place, risks allowing the best to become the enemy of the good because neither the current nor any future regime in Iran is likely to agree to accept restrictions over and above those required by the NPT. On the other hand, a full abandonment of sanctions in exchange for a promise not to weaponize, even if fully monitored, would still leave Iran out of com-
pliance with its other treaty obligations. Sanctions should, therefore, be deployed for both long- and short-term purposes. The long-term objective should be to bring Iran fully into compliance with the NPT. The short-term objective should be to halt the Iranian program short of weaponization.

**Containment Plus**

Containment will remain at the core of U.S. policy as long as Iran continues to subvert and threaten its neighbors. This will be true whether or not Iran possesses a nuclear arsenal but will be harder to achieve if it does. Harder still would be containing the regional influence of an Iran that had been the target of an unprovoked U.S. or Israeli attack.

Containment of a nuclear-armed Iran will need to be complemented by deterrence, to counterbalance the threat of nuclear use or blackmail; by sanctions, to offer the eventual hope of rolling back that capability; by engagement, to manage such confrontations that might occur; and by the employment of soft power, in order to advance the day when containment will cease to be necessary. Only such a combination of policies offers the possibility of advancing all three main U.S. objectives.

**Deterrence**

The United States successfully deterred a much more powerful Soviet Union for more than 40 years. Some argue that Iran is different, that its leaders are irrational, and that the threat of devastating retaliation would not dissuade it from employing or threatening to employ nuclear weapons. Although this fear is understandable, given occasionally heated Iranian rhetoric, there is nothing in the Islamic Republic’s actual behavior throughout its existence to substantiate the charge of irrationality, let alone suicidal lunacy. Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whatever their other flaws, are models of
mental health and restrained behavior compared with Joseph Stalin or Mao Zedong.

A more reasonable apprehension is not that nuclear deterrence would not work but rather that it would. A nuclear-armed Iran would be able to deter the United States from reacting forcefully to Iranian misbehavior. With the threat of U.S. (and Israeli) retaliation effectively removed, Iran could employ its nonmilitary instruments of influence even more aggressively than in the past.

This fear too seems overblown. It is most unlikely that Iran would actually employ nuclear weapons for any reason short of regime preservation, particularly because Iran will remain inferior to all the other nuclear powers more or less indefinitely. Given crushing U.S. superiority across the entire military (and economic and political) spectrum, there are many potential responses available to the United States short of forced regime change with which to deter or punish Iranian transgressions.

The recent revelation of alleged Iranian-sponsored attempts to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States and attack the Israeli embassy there illustrates this proposition. Iran does not currently possess nuclear weapons, yet the U.S. government is not considering invading and occupying that country in reaction to this conspiracy. The expenses entailed in forced regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq effectively militate against attempting to do the same in a country three times more populous. If the Iranian leadership sanctioned this plot, it was not deterred by the huge U.S. nuclear arsenal, nor would the U.S. government be deterred from responding in turn if Iran had such weapons. Although Iran is most unlikely to employ nuclear weapons in circumstances short of defense of the regime, it might be tempted to adopt a more belligerent attitude in dealing with its neighbors and regional adversaries, particularly those without their own nuclear deterrent. For this reason, the United States will have to stand ready to supply a counterweight by extending its own nuclear umbrella over those friends and allies in the region that seek such assurances.

The United States has already begun to put in place one element of such extended deterrence by arranging to provide Europe with a shield against Iranian missile attacks. The United States has also collaborated
closely with Israel on anti-ballistic-missile technology. As Iran moves
toward a nuclear weapon capability, one will likely see similar U.S. sup-
port offered to other regional states.

Deploying defenses against Iranian nuclear attack involves what
is called *deterrence by denial*—that is to say, physically denying the
Iranians the capacity to conduct a successful attack. The United States
is also likely to protect its friends and allies by extending deterrence
by punishment—that is to say, retaliation. Given overwhelming U.S.
military superiority, such a promise should represent a more credible
form of deterrence than that which the United States extended over
Cold War Europe. Then the United States had to promise to commit
suicide in defense of its European allies. Cold War deterrence rested
upon what was accurately referred to as *mutually assured destruction*.
In the case of Iran, U.S. guarantees will rely instead on the promise
of unilaterally assured destruction because only one side, the United
States, will possess the power to destroy the other.

**Sanctions**

Sanctions and other forms of persuasion should be deployed for both
long- and short-term purposes. The long-term objective should be to
bring Iran fully into compliance with the NPT. The short-term objec-
tive should be to halt the Iranian program short of weaponization.
Achievement of both objectives will require the deft employment of
carrots and sticks. Carrots should be deployed if Iran agrees to verifica-
tion measures that convincingly demonstrate that it has not weapon-
ized, but with enough sticks retained to provide a continuing incentive
to eventually bring that country, perhaps under new leadership, back
into full conformity with the NPT.

**Engagement**

Diplomacy is unlikely to yield substantial breakthroughs as long as the
current Iranian leadership remains in power. The United States nev-
ertheless needs reliable channels of communication with the Iranian regime in order to garner information, signal warnings, avoid unintended conflict, and be positioned to move on openings toward accord when and if one arises. Should Iran actually build and deploy nuclear weapons, such channels of communication will become all the more important.

U.S. ambassadors in capitals and multinational posts, such as the UN, should be authorized to hold discussions with their Iranian counterparts within the framework of their existing responsibilities and instructions. These contacts should occur quietly and without fanfare. Eventually, if and when Tehran proves receptive, some privileged channel for more-comprehensive conversations could be established. The United States should negotiate an incidents-at-sea agreement with Tehran and set up other emergency channels for communication.

**Soft Power**

Regime change is the best—maybe the only—path to achieving all three main U.S. objectives. But explicit U.S. efforts to bring about such change, whether overt or covert, will probably have the reverse effect, helping perpetuate the regime and strengthen its current leaders. For the immediate future, therefore, the best thing the United States can do is to encourage political reform in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries where the United States has greater access and influence. Adopting a region-wide and, indeed, globally consistent approach to democratization is important to establishing the credibility of U.S. support for reform in Iran.

Soft power should be envisaged more as a magnet than as a lever. The best way of employing the attractive elements of U.S. society is simply to remove barriers to exposure. Making Internet censorship more difficult is one way of doing this. Facilitating travel, commerce, and study abroad is also important. Sanctions erect barriers to this kind of exposure. These barriers represent an unavoidable trade-off between the objectives of containment and the promotion of domestic reform, a
trade-off that needs to be carefully considered each time new sanctions are levied or old ones renewed.

Reformers in Iran are pressing for evolution, not revolution. The Green Movement is not seeking to overturn the Iranian constitution’s unique mix of republican and Islamic elements but rather to give more reality to the former. Oddly enough, Ahmadinejad is challenging the status quo from the other end of the political spectrum. In the short term, neither the Green Movement nor Ahmadinejad seems likely to succeed. But Iran has a young, reasonably well-educated population, one increasingly plugged into the world around it. Even as the United States seeks to isolate and penalize Iran for its external misbehavior and nuclear ambitions, it should be seeking to maximize the exposure of its population to the United States, the West, and the newly dynamic Middle East. By the same token, the United States should avoid any association with separatist elements and extremist groups, whom the vast bulk of the Iranian people reject.