

Iran's New Security Environment Imperatives: Counter Containment or Engagement with the US

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Abstract

The Iran-US relations since 1979 Revolution have remained tension-ridden. Various efforts towards resolution of the sensitive and critical issues between them have failed to bear fruit. The present article looks into the state of these relations from the vantage of Iran's security environment and how the U.S. policies, particularly since the 2001 occupation of Afghanistan and 2003 war of choice in Iraq, have dramatically affected Iran's immediate security environment. The paper argues that as a result of the removal of the Taliban and Ba'athist regimes and the emergence of pro-Iran ruling coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran's regional stature and influence was enhanced, which also coincided with simultaneous shrinking of US material and symbolic resources in the region. The article also tries to shed light on the parameters of Iran's security environment, decision making processes, sources of security and defense policies, which would help towards a better understanding of the reasons and rationale for the still tumultuous relations with the US, including in particular on Iran's nuclear program. A review of the past U.S. strategies in dealing with Iran as well as of the alternative strategies currently on the table – Containment, Comprehensive and Selective Engagements, Military option – and Iran's Counter Containment strategy, indicates that given the actual situation in the region a mere continuation of the past might simply prove impossible. A full-scale confrontation or a major reconciliation appears to be the only possible scenarios for the future. The paper concludes that Comprehensive Engagement will instead present a way out of the decades-old conflict with tremendous benefits for the protagonists and the surrounding region.

Keywords: Iran-US Relations, Iran's Security Environment, U.S. Strategies, Iran's Counter Containment, Comprehensive Engagement

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of Iran's national security environment, challenges, opportunities, and imperatives, with specific consideration for the US-Iran relations as a critical factor and its current dynamics and future prospects. The paper initially will provide a rather brief background on the evolving nature of Iran's security environment and the historical factors affecting and shaping Iranian perceptions and policies. It will also look into the three major events in recent decades that have transformed the domestic and foreign security landscape of Iran; Islamic Revolution in 1979, collapse of the Soviet Union, and the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The security and political environment of Iran will be examined in order to arrive at a better grasp of the range of strategic and security predicaments the Islamic Republic faces. The paper will also address the role and impact of such factors as Iran's experience with external war, economic and geopolitical imperatives, national pride, threat perceptions, and ideology in shaping Iran's decision-making process and thinking on national security.

Turning to US-Iran relations, the paper will then present a brief review of these relations since the Revolution, including a catalogue of contentious issues between the two sides. While Iran's nuclear program, terrorism and extremism, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Middle East peace process, and the issue of human rights have been the major issues for the Americans, Iranian concerns have included the following: sanctions, Iranian frozen assets, deliberate



disregard of Iran's regional stature and role, continuing U.S. and NATO operations in Iran's security environment, support for secessionist movements, interference in Iran's domestic affairs, and expeditious withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan and Iraq. The review will also address the issues and situations where Iran and U.S. share common concerns and interests - Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan – even if for their own particular reasons - and at a more strategic level, security in the Persian Gulf, including long-term security of energy sources. Furthermore, such alternative strategies as selective or comprehensive engagement, containment, and military option for the U.S., and the counter-containment strategy for Iran, will be reviewed from the vantage point of assessing their usefulness or effectiveness in managing - and preferably resolving – issues and situations of contention.

Based on the discretion that the resort thus far to the wide gamut of foreign policy tools in support of “cold peace” and “cold war” has failed to resolve outstanding issues between Iran and the U.S., the paper concludes that continuation of the past may simply prove impossible, in which case search for a new alternative approach geared to better management and improvement of relations is well justified.

Historical and Structural Context

Iran, a sizeable country located in one of the most vital and strategic parts of the world, borders seven other countries. It connects the Middle East to Central Asia and Southwest Asia, and is situated between the oil-rich and strategically significant Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea.

Three times during the past 32 years events of great historical significance have transformed Iran's national, regional and global setting - the 1979 Revolution, collapse of the Soviet Union, and the U.S. response to September 11.

First, the Revolution changed not only the prism through which



the outside world was received and interpreted, but also how Iran was perceived and treated (Mesbahi, 1997; and 2009)¹; disruption of relations with the U.S. and Saddam Hussein's full-scale military aggression were the most consequential results. Iran's shared long border with the Soviet Union played an important role for the West during much of the Cold War. Because of its strategic location, geopolitics, and large oil reserves, Iran occupied an important position for both East and West during this period. Its alliance with the West, along with domestic stability, was deemed crucial to the preservation of Western interests (Chubin, 2002). As an extension of its strategic significance, Iran, as of 1972 under the U.S. Nixon Doctrine, became the main pillar of stability in the Persian Gulf. The 1979 Iranian Revolution changed the geopolitics of Iran; an overnight transformation from one of the closest and most strategic allies of the U.S. to one of its most vehement opponents. Iran's threat perception and foreign policy priorities underwent radical change with respect to its immediate environment and the larger world at this pivotal juncture.

Social revolutions, often seek and entail fundamental changes not only in domestic arrangements of power but also aim at restructuring the country's foreign relations, and even fancy changing established regional and international institutions, norms and rules. Iranian Revolution was no exception. The post-revolutionary new power elite in Iran sought a change in the status quo both in the surrounding region and on a world scale. Iranian revolutionaries were willing – ideologically at least - to consider and, if necessary, use non-conventional means in pursuing their ideals and objectives. However, as it often happens with the revolutionary situations, as time passed, revolutionary fervor abated, and conditions changed, gradually a pragmatist line emerged that favored if not a totally new vision of the world but at least new conventional methods embedded in and supported by a different reading of Islam that would enable the new establishment to achieve their revolutionary objectives².



It is interesting to note that while successive periodic elections have brought different parliaments and administrations to power since the early days of the Revolution, but the overall perceptions and general objectives of the power elite regarding the international political system have remained almost the same. In their view, the dominant world order and power arrangement are hierarchically organized to the disadvantage of Iran, the Muslim World, and the developing world in general, it is unjust both in terms of a revolutionary reading of Islam as well as the current conception of Iran's national interests, and hence, it must be changed. Instruments of achieving change have varied from one administration to another. Rafsanajani and Khatami – considering, of course, the nuance differences in outlook, discourse, and actual conduct – tended to pursue desired change through established and internationally accepted rules and norms. Ahmadinejad, coming in 2005 on a platform critical of the previous two outlooks, took a different approach.

Second, collapse of the Soviet Union changed Iran's geopolitics, and removed the limited umbrella of the Cold War. By exposing Iran's northern frontier and further complicating the problems of an already border/neighbor-saturated country, the collapse opened the Pandora's Box of a totally new situation fraught with both potential opportunities and actual vulnerabilities. The impact of this development on Iran's security environment was tremendous by all accounts; the emerging new geo-politics all but changed the threat and opportunity equation for Iran. All of a sudden Iran found itself bordering three new land neighbors, and two new states vying independently for access to and influence in the Caspian Sea. Even though Iran's chances for using the unfolding opportunities for cooperation with these countries increased, but the immediate regional and the supra-regional decision to isolate Iran, especially in the area of energy, severely hampered the practical realization of these potentials – which was made worse due to the sudden eruption of an



ethno-territorial conflict between two of the new neighbors - Azerbaijan and Armenia (Mesbahi, 2001). Withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and the ensuing internal bloodletting between various Mujahedin factions with its attendant instability faced Iran with the second wave of refugee influx. Iran also became a significant transit route for narcotics at this time – an unfortunate situation that has persisted since and even become worse as instability has further perpetuated in Afghanistan in the post-2001 period.

Third, the 9/11 tragic events served as the catalyst for yet another round of drastic change in Iran's regional if not its very national security environment. The U.S. invaded Afghanistan, removed the Taliban from power, substantially weakened Al-Qaeda, and in a "war of choice" occupied Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. The new situation created a new security environment that fundamentally transformed the security landscape in the region. Initially, friends and foes, actors and spectators, all felt baffled at the nature of the emerging security complex, whose strategic calculus gradually clarified itself with the passage of time and lent itself to easier contemplation and speculation of its future potentials.

U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq led to the emergence of a new security environment, whose principal beneficiary happened to be a U.S. regional rival – Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran's avowed enemies in the east and west were replaced by friendly governments. Moreover, the U.S. engagement in two costly wars and the increasing pressure on available resources at the national level, with serious negative repercussions for the domestic economy, caused substantial constriction in the US material and symbolic resources at regional and international levels. While the U.S. regional allies suffered a rather sharp deficit in legitimacy, a much buoyed Iran felt itself in a position to build important security, intelligence and military infrastructure in neighboring countries – as explained later by Iranian officials primarily for deterrence purposes against possible outside hostile



actions or retaliation in case of a military attack. It was rather ironic that the new security environment was good enough of an incentive for the power elite in Iran to assume the mantle of a proponent of “status quo” rather than act according to its traditional revolutionary predisposition and impulse - at least for medium term. Looking at the actual tally, it can be said that since the early years of the decade Iran’s regional foreign policy objectives have not been revolutionary.

Consideration of the following features – though not exhaustive - can help us arrive at a better understanding of Iran’s foreign policy behavior.

First - Rentier State. The government in Iran is the sole recipient of the oil and gas revenues that account for over 80percent of state’s income and foreign exchange earnings. Monopoly in receipt and control over such a source of easy and abundant income has led to the government’s relative autonomy from the society as well as its simultaneous dependence on the international community and external markets – a feature shared by the state both before and after the 1979 Revolution. With its hands on the oil revenues, the government in Iran has exercised a considerable degree of influence in determining which projects to be funded, which social groups to be given privileged access to consumption possibilities, and also which country or bloc of countries would constitute Iran’s major trading and economic partners. The same phenomenon also makes it vulnerable to major price – and ultimately, income fluctuations - with quite serious policy repercussions (Farhi, 1990),

Second - Ayatollah Khomeini called the post-monarchy Iranian state an *Islamic Republic*, which was subsequently enshrined and encoded in the 1979 Constitution. It is Islamic because it should be instituted and governed according to the law of Islam - Maximalist view - or it should not contradict Islamic Shariah - Minimalist view. It is Republic because, while acting under the overall ultimate Divine sovereignty, as per various provisions of the Constitution, it is based on the will and sovereignty of the people – to be effected through



holding regular, periodic elections, separation of powers, and institution of some form of constitutional check and balance. But, what was seemingly assumed at the outset to be a theoretically justified and practically working easy combination, later proved quite problematic and came to be judged as an unconvincing juxtaposition of two different phenomena. And at the practical level, state – as defined and understood in modern political thought - has become an arena where ideological, status and class conflicts are fought out. As a concrete manifestation of the dichotomous theoretical-legal divide, active social forces and political parties/currents tend to lean either toward the Islamic or the Republican aspect of the Islamic Republic – which also somehow reflects the very essence of the conflict as well as the moral-political orientations of the society at large (Hajjarian, 2000);

Third - Social revolutions, as borne out by history, are often accompanied with a peculiar kind of idealism and utopianism – with the particular “utopia” embodying a construction of an idealized past or future. But, as history tells us, it is practically impossible to shape or construct the reality in a manner commensurate with the expectations of a post-revolutionary society and its utopia, especially in the modern world. Whether simply frustrated or convinced of the futility of the project of pursuance of “utopia” in human society, nonetheless the *post-revolutionary* population still demands the realization of a certain level of initial goals and earlier promises. Such a society is qualitatively different in various respects from a society that has not experienced a social revolution, particularly in terms of its demands and expectations as well as in terms of the acceptable norms of state conduct vis-à-vis the rights and entitlements of citizens (Tajzadeh, 2010);

Fourth - Iran is a *Multi-Constituent Society* comprised of different ethnic, religious, and lingual minorities – with the ethnic minorities mostly inhabiting the country’s periphery. Many of these minorities share close affinities with their people on the other side of the



geopolitical border. This reality – the Iranian peculiar mosaic - has had, and continues to have, an important impact on the national defense and security policies of Iran as a nation-state – independent to some large measure from the particular political or ideological mold of the ruling center. As aptly underlined by former President Khatami while at the helm: “Whoever presides in Tehran and seeks to form a coherent [national] policy must be conscious of the multi-faceted nature of the [Iranian] society.” (Khatami, 2000)

Fifth – Iran proper looks at itself as the “motherland” of the Persian language and Shi’ism, which, as borne out by both past and contemporary history, constitutes an important integral part of the Iranian national identity, and hence, strategic national interests. The role of the Persian language in contributing to the promotion of literature and culture in the traditional realm of the larger Persian/Iranian sphere of influence dates back in a sense to the pre-Islamic era, albeit further strengthened since the early centuries of the Islamic era. The role of Shi’ism - even though shorter in terms of age as compared with the language – dates back to the sixteenth century when the Safavids established the unified Iranian state around the Twelver School – which has gradually come to form a central feature of the Iranian society, inclusive of the crux of state policy and pursuit of national interests, both before and after 1979.

Iran’s National Security Environment

A mere glance at the incredible array of security challenges facing Iran – now the Islamic Republic – shows the actual parameters of Iran’s security predicament. Recognition of the reality on the ground is not the same as sympathy.

In the North - The stability of the Soviet era has been replaced by an intense rivalry over the resources of the Caspian Sea, largely to the territorial, political, economic, and even environmental detriment of Iran (McGuinn and Mesbahi, 2000). The situation in Azerbaijan, where Ilham Aliev’s government is grappling with the question of



political legitimacy and the country is still engaged in a seemingly irresolvable political-military conflict with the neighboring Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, can hardly project prospects for stability – with inevitable serious implications and repercussions for Iran. With a sizeable population of Azeris in Iran, Iran reasonably prefers to see a stable and prosperous Azerbaijan to its North. Turkmenistan, also a new neighbor in the north, facing potential instability as in the Kyrgyzstan and yet in a position to present competition in the oil and gas field and difficulty on the legal regime in the Caspian Sea, is another area of concern.

In the East - Iran's experience with Afghanistan since 1979 has been quite hectic and tumultuous; a decade of Soviet occupation and war led to another long period of civil war and jockeying for power, which culminated in the emergence of violently anti-Shi'ite, hostile Taliban. The overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 – a positive development for Iran in itself – has been succeeded since with the presence and active engagement of U.S. and NATO forces, without any clear prospects for withdrawal. Iran's long, mountainous, and porous border with Afghanistan, especially in so far as the refugee and narcotic drugs problems are concerned, makes security and stability in Afghanistan a matter of serious national security interest to Iran. While having to deal with the economic and social difficulties of the continued presence of a large number of Afghan refugees, Iran's fight against transit of Afghan illicit drugs by narco-terrorists has been extremely costly in both human and material terms which has been further compounded with the presence of abundant, cheap narcotics on Iranian streets and the unfortunate expansion of the addict population. This explains the Iranian policy-makers' preference for a strong and stable central government in Afghanistan.

Pakistan, another neighbor to the East, while “friendly” in routine political-diplomatic terms, presents its own peculiar challenges. While a nuclear power with all its implications, Pakistan has been an ardent supporter of the Taliban and harbored anti-



Shi'ite/anti-Iranian regional extremist movements. Given the multiethnic nature of the Pakistani society and on-going ethnic-sectarian feud, prevalence of poverty, continuing dispute and contention with India, rise of extremist Islamist currents, and the perennial political instability, Iran has every reason to be concerned about the prospects of the emergence of a failed state with nuclear weapons in its immediate neighborhood – with serious repercussions for the region and even for the world. Iran's interests with the Pakistani situation also include prevention of drugs transit through Iran, border security, the Baluchistan minority problem, and the position and rights of Shi'ites in Pakistan, which is also directly related to the Iranian expectation to see control of extremist elements and currents within Pakistan (Najjar, 2011).

In the West - Turkey, despite fast growing economic, trade, and energy relations and even political cooperation – as reflected in the May 2010 Iran-Turkey-Brazil initiative on the uranium swap and current activism in the nuclear negotiations, even though driven in large measure by sheer pragmatist concerns and interests - is a NATO member with strong traditional military ties to the US and until recently quite close liaison with Israel. While the Islamic credentials of the current Turkish government and the perceptible distance it has taken from the previous established secular posture and politics of the Turkish state has helped improvement of relations with the Islamic Republic, however, the deep-seated undercurrents of historical and traditional rivalries, now also compounded by the implicit rivalry over two competing discourse on the role of Islam in the public sphere, can hardly be neglected.

Another critical neighbor to the west is Iraq, with a track record of conflict relations with Iran since Iraq emerged as an independent state in 1921 and tumultuous relations with the Islamic Republic since 1979, including a bloody, protracted 8-year war and a host of still unresolved war-related issues. Even if the post-Saddam new governance structure is closely allied with Iran – much to the



strongly-felt resentment of a segment of the Iraqi population and most of the Arab world - Iraq is still hosting a large number of US forces and is expected to enjoy close relations with the U.S. in the future even after total withdrawal of the American forces. Iraq, despite close historical, religious, institutional and personal ties, and even under a friendly pro-Iran coalition, presents particular security challenges for Iran: still smoldering war-related bitter memories; contention between Iran and U.S. in the Iraqi theatre in practically all areas; and potential rivalry over regional stature and influence, especially in the Persian Gulf. The fact that many capitals in the Arab world and also influential conservative, Neocon quarters in the U.S. (Bolton, 2009, Wolfowitz, 2009) – who are unhappy with the Iranian influence in Iraq – would like to see Iraq pursue a hostile policy towards Iran underscores the seriously challenging, sensitive nature of the relations between the two countries. It is also of note that Iran considers a unified Iraq under a relatively strong government to be in its long-term strategic interest. And contrary to certain current perceptions or speculations, a disintegrated Iraq with a Shi'ite government in the south and Kurdish rule in the north will indeed present an enduring nightmare for Tehran.

In the South - In the Persian Gulf, the traditional sphere of Iranian historical preponderance and where Iran's strategic and economic-trade concerns, including safety of oil exports, are at stake, the country still faces the United States – politically as well as militarily. Security and stability in the Persian Gulf have always been a matter of critical national security concern of Iran – and will continue to do so in the future – which calls, inter alia, for removal of tension among the regional countries concerned. Increasing institutional military presence of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf since early 1980s, also as a direct result of the outward-looking policies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its individual member states, has significantly increased Iranian security concerns ever since. Purchase and procurement of advanced U.S./Western military hardware by the



Arab states of the Persian Gulf during the past decades, particularly in recent years, with the clear intention of counter-balancing Iranian prowess (Warrick, 2010) could have hardly been reassuring to Tehran. Wikileaks documents – whatever the incentives behind the leakage – threw some light on the depth of the not-so-friendly feelings towards Iran in some of the neighboring capitals, when made under presumed privacy – including with regard to the possible U.S.-Israeli military attack on Iran, which if anything, could not but have further sensitized and heightened Iranian national security concerns (Hadian, 2011).

The above sketchy review of the security challenges surrounding countries present to decision-makers in Tehran points to difficulties of national security planning that would enhance Iran's security and reduce its vulnerabilities.

Iran's National Security Policy Sources

The Iranian national security policies under the Islamic Republic have been influenced – and shaped - by the intersection of ideological orientations, Iran's threat perceptions, past experiences, national pride, and economic and geopolitical imperatives. All these factors – even though to differing degrees, individually and in combination – play a very significant role in informing and framing Iranian national security decisions and policies. A critical point that needs to be underscored at this stage of the analysis is that all the factors discussed below involve, one way or another, or are somehow affected by US-Iran relations.

1. Ideological Sources - Three important ideological outlooks and orientations have played an influential role in informing and shaping the national security and defense policies in Iran - Revolutionary Islam, Reformist Islam, and Traditional Iranian Nationalism. Depending on the particular issue and the constellation of political forces involved, also considering the relevance, interaction and impact of external players, any or a combination of these three



outlooks/orientations come to bear on policy-making. Failure to arrive at a reasonable degree of consensus among the three competing camps, as is often the case, leads inevitably to serious problems in implementation.

2. Threat Perceptions - Threat perception can be categorized into threats to Revolutionary ideology/values and threats to national interest as traditionally defined. In the post-revolutionary Iran, according to the dominant discourse, “revolutionary ideology/values” per se has been equated with “national interest.” From the vantage point of the dominant ideological approach, the “global arrogance” (US imperialism) and international Zionism are out to destroy Islam. From this perspective, revolutionary Iran – the Islamic Republic - is seen as the center of the Islamic world, providing [revolutionary] leadership to the Islamic Ummah (nation/community), which the United States/global arrogance abhors and tries to destroy (Larijani, 2007). Viewed as such, “global arrogance” and its regional corollary – Israel – represent the principal and the most immediate threats. American puppets/cronies in the region are also considered as sources of threat, though of a lesser significance and consequence.

Iran's national interest – as traditionally defined and keeping the above proviso in mind - becomes more important when there is an incompatibility with ideological priorities. Territorial integrity – as best reflected in the dispute on the three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf - geopolitical issues, and enhancing Iran's international stature via demonstrating the primacy of Iran's national interests, have in actuality played a more influential role in informing and molding Iran's security and defense policies. Threats emanating from Iran's immediate neighborhood and environment are considered more dangerous than those from countries farther away, provided, of course, that ideological considerations are not the driving force behind the foreign policies of other countries.

3. Past Experiences - The long, bloody and destructive war with Iraq, including Iraq's extensive and repeated use of chemical weapons



against Iranians and also the war of cities, deeply affected the psyche of the Iranian population at large – reviving the old memories of a nation that has been subjected to frequent foreign invasion and occupation since ancient times. The Iran-Iraq War experience, especially the UN Security Council’s unbelievable refusal to condemn the act of aggression and call for the immediate withdrawal of forces and the later failure to react strongly to Iraq’s numerous war crimes, including resort to chemical weapons, led Iran to conclude that it simply could not rely on the United Nations to provide for its national security and defense. The bitter conclusion that the international community could not be trusted proved extremely costly during the War and came to cast its long shadow on the foreign and defense policies of the Islamic Republic afterwards. As seen by Iran’s longest-serving foreign minister, “Historical precedent is in fact an important input into Iran’s foreign policy.” (Velayati, 1998)

4. National Pride – Iranians, as historical inheritors of an old, millennial civilization with a deeply-felt grandiose perception of themselves, their role and power, especially in the wake of a successful popular social revolution in 1979 – which has added rejuvenated ideological fervor [revolutionary Shi’ite ideology] to the traditional Iranian nationalistic pride – appear to have found it quite difficult to accept that their young, newly established neighbors have more wealth and opportunities, more advanced technology, and a higher standard of living. Given the stark differences at the material level, the ruling elite have instead tried to argue that advancement in science and technology (particularly nuclear, stem cell and software) could empower Iran and help raise the country to its deserved place in the world. This outlook could well explain the dogged pursuit of the nuclear program – even if at tremendous costs – especially if placed in the bigger context of a region consisting of three nuclear neighbors (Israel, India, and Pakistan), which has led some Iranians to feel that achieving a comparable power status necessitates acquiring nuclear capability (Ahmadinejad 2010 and Kemp 2003).



5. Economic Imperatives - Iran's almost 75 million people, especially considering the quite high level of education, have expectations of a higher standard of living and a better life. Taking national resources and capabilities, including abundant oil revenues (discussed previously) into account, it is now a fact that more than three decades after the 1979 Revolution Iranians expect a higher level of governance and a much better national economic performance. As is widely known, the Iranian government – in fact, the Islamic Republic - is under serious pressure to perform. It can be safely predicted that, on the whole, economic issues will exercise increasing influence on Iran's future security and defense policies; low rates of economic growth and capital formation will, in the final analysis, also negatively impact the country's expenditures in the military-defense field.

6. Geopolitical Considerations – As discussed earlier in the paper, Iran is living in a tumultuous area and is surrounded by quite a number of active conflict situations - particularly instability in Afghanistan and Iraq and uncertainty in Azerbaijan and Pakistan. Extensive U.S. presence in many of the areas in Iran's immediate neighborhood or in the surrounding environment is challenging and poses a problem – lack of any meaningful buffer or physical space between the two sides who look at each other with deep suspicion and hostile intentions. Iran and the U.S. are literally neighbors – all around Iran; to the South, East, West and North. Such an unenviable position for Iran is bound to enhance the impact and influence of geopolitical issues, situations, and considerations on the country's security and defense policies.

Iran's National Security Decision-making Institutions and Process

A detailed discussion of Iran's decision-making apparatus and process is beyond the scope of this paper, but two points merit to be emphasized. First, decisions on major issues, whether on internal or



external matters, are not made by one person, a particular group, or a single body. Second, all decisions on key issues are made, in the final analysis, through consensus – for lack of a better word - and via a rather complex process of political-ideological interaction within and among a composite network of constitutionally-based formal institutions and bodies, and informal networks of influential actors and players. The complex arrangement also involves the element of personal relationships, especially within the clerical establishment and hierarchy, individual initiatives, and the traditional Byzantine wheeling and dealing come into the picture – with the entire dynamism acting under the ultimate overall authority and or blessing of the person/office of the Velayat-e Faqih [Guardian Jurisconsult]. Decision-making for defense and security policies, as a critical area of national import, significance, and consequence and of particular interest to the widest possible range of actors/players at the national level, represent the best example for such a process of policy articulation and development. Given the peculiar dynamism of such a process of decision-making with myriad actors/stakeholders with diffuse and even blurred lines of responsibility and authority, many outside observers have found the situation chaotic, often wondering – even with a sense of amazement if not perplexity - who makes what decisions and how, albeit the final outcome being considered “consensually-based” (Byman, et al, 2001). It is true that the consensually-driven process provides policy stability, yet, as indicated, reaching decisions becomes extremely difficult and arduous, especially on major national security decisions, including relations with the U.S. – which has in fact proved as the most difficult issue for the ruling elite all through the past three decades (to be discussed in the next section). As described by Mesbahi, “consensus in the Islamic Republic is borne out of a painstaking process of give-and-take, public and private maneuvering, and at the end a “democratic’ process in its own context and meaning, within a maze of incredibly complex labyrinth of interest groups and factions” (Mesbahi, 2004).



While the dominant conservative bloc has significant power – which we do not discuss here in detail - but their often recalcitrant rhetoric is both checked by their own sense of reality as well as serious increasing challenges within their own ranks, and also by the reformers even if practically pushed to the outer limits of the power constellation. The actual power – and the paramount role - of the conservative bloc in charge, even if suffering from image and legitimacy deficit, should not be overlooked; they control the “real believers” and hot-headed radical fringe – which the reformers acutely lacked even while they controlled both the executive and legislative branches during the first term of Khatami’s presidency (1997-2001).

A number of formal and informal institutions and organizations have been engaged in and played an important role, though to differing degrees, in shaping security policy in the Islamic Republic. Major formal institutions include the office of the Supreme Leader and the President; Supreme National Security Council (SNSC); Iran’s armed forces (particularly the Pasdaran); intelligence, interior, and foreign ministries; Islamic propagation organizations; Expediency Council; and Foreign Relations and Security Committee of the Majles [Parliament]. A number of informal organizations, individuals, and political “circles” – or pseudo-political parties - also provide input for security policy issues – whether through the quite active informal networks for political activity [Iranian-style lobbying], the traditional religious networks [mosques, Friday congregational prayers, etc.], or through the media. Depending on the nature of the issue, the interplay between these different organizations, institutions, bodies, circles, and individuals differ, both in terms of the process of debate and negotiation among them at both formal and informal levels as well as of the kind and degree of impact on the final outcome – let alone on implementation.

The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which is chaired by the President and is composed of the representatives of all



the bodies and institutions in the burgeoning security apparatus of the Iranian state – and reports on its decisions to the Supreme Leader for final approval - plays a very important role in initiating, debating, and ultimately reaching consensus on security issues. Typically, decisions of the SNSC, especially after receiving the Leader's imprimatur, have been abided by the participants/stakeholders – with or without ex-poste qualms. Breaking ranks on SNSC decisions carries a heavy price – as happened in fall 2003 when the Council's hard-won sensitive decision, enjoying the Leader's approval, on the suspension of enrichment of uranium following the agreement concluded with the Foreign Ministers of the European 3 was challenged by a number of hardliners and conservatives. The un-accommodating elements ultimately fell in line and joined the decision – which, as is known, proved contentious in the post-2005 political ambiance and was reversed, with significant consequences to follow.

Relations with the US

- The U.S.-orchestrated coup of August 1953 in Iran and the subsequent all-out support of the Shah during his quarter of a century dictatorial rule came, in retrospect, to serve as the most critical event in shaping “The Perception” of Iranians towards the U.S. Donette Murray's assessment on the longer-term impact of the coup imbroglio is shared by almost all Iranians, across the political spectrum. “The shoring up of an authoritarian monarch at democracy's expense put an indelible stain on US-Iranian relations that has retained a vibrant immediacy undiminished by time, and forms another thread in the narrative.” (Murray, 2010) The story of the ever-deepening intimacy between the US and Iran under the Shah, and how it developed from an early ‘clency relationship’ in the 1950s (Gasiorowski, 1991) to the Shah's becoming the gendarme of the Persian Gulf as of 1972 (Nixon Doctrine) and to his later years of megalomaniac ambitions and West-phobic rhetoric, is history to all students of US foreign policy and contemporary Iranian history. The euphoric US-Shah ‘ecstasy’ of the



early-to-mid 70s was followed by the totally unexpected 1978-79 popular movement and the 'agony' in the wake of the February 1979 Islamic Revolution, and hence, the venomous recriminations in the U.S. of "who lost Iran?"

Looking back, it seems that a number of major episodes coalesced to set the actual context, parameters and contours for the making and implementation of mutually hostile policies that shaped the relationship – or lack thereof – between the two countries ever since – and up to this very moment.

In post-Revolutionary Iran, even though the Islamic coalition, led by the Shi'ite clerical establishment, captured and to a large extent controlled the state apparatus, but the dominant discourse that influenced the conceptions and perceptions of the revolutionary elite was that of radical left with sometimes Islamic polishing – quite in tune with the post-1960s dominant radical, revolutionary ethos across the Third World. Framing the U.S. identity and policies and actions as "imperialism" that was inherently bent on acting against the oppressed nations, and drawing on the past U.S. conduct in Iran – as well as in such other countries as Vietnam, Chili, Brazil, Guatemala (to name only a few) - the radical left convinced many Iranians that the U.S. was in fact determined to reinstate the Shah. Allowing an ailing Shah into the U.S. in October 1979 even for medical treatment – under the pressure of his former Republican friends and benefactors and despite Carter administration's expressed reluctance and trepidation – set the stage for a group of radical [Muslim] Iranian university students to storm the U.S. Embassy in early November – and hence the 444-day "Hostage Crisis" – which, similar to the August 1953 event, came to leave an enduring negative image of Iranians in general and the post-revolutionary government in particular in the minds and hearts of most Americans that still impacts the framing of the "Issue of Iran."

The election of Ronald Reagan, not unrelated to the 1979 "Iranian fiasco" and the subsequent "Embassy humiliation" and also



similarly to the Nicaraguan revolution, made strengthening the American hard and soft power as number one foreign policy priority. Releasing of the hostages just as the new president took oath of office – finely synchronized by Iranians to further humiliate a defeated, demoralized Jimmy Carter, quizzical indeed in retrospect and in terms of political calculation and colossal consequences - helped to refurbish the damaged American image and ego. Coming into office a few months after Iraq had invaded Iran in September 1980, the Reagan administration's major concern, as it turned out and despite official neutrality, was geared towards containing the unwanted escalation of the Iran-Iraq War, but practically preventing either side from winning the War – which as of summer 1982 meant preventing Iranian victory and containing spread of the spill-over effects of Iran's revolutionary ideology.³ Despite open mutual acrimony between Tehran and Washington, especially given the unmistakable U.S. tilt towards Iraq as of 1983, the attempt in 1985 from the U.S. side which was supposedly intended to improve the relations – later dubbed as Iran-Contra Affair - was so badly managed by those directly involved that led in a total turnabout to much worsened relations, also because of knee-jerk reaction of a personally discredited and hurt Ronald Reagan.⁴

The post-War period brought some prospects for the betterment of relations. Election of President Hashemi Rafsanjani in Iran in summer 1989 on a pragmatist platform, with pronounced emphasis on rebuilding the previously badly damaged foreign relations, had already received a potentially positive chord in President George Bush's oft-quoted line in his inaugural speech in January 1989 that "good will begets good will". He had also indicated in the same address in very clear terms that "progress on US-Iran relations was possible," even if through what he had set out to do - "small things leading to significant developments." Having received the not-so-implicit message, Tehran assisted with the release of American hostages in Lebanon. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait



in August 1990 turned out to be the “major event to influence Bush’s policy towards Iran.” Iran’s general neutrality in the conflict that ensued brought about some positive impact in the relations with the US and the Europeans. Just a few months down the line, the potentially bright prospects for real change in the state of relations was dimmed for all practical purposes when at the end of the Operation Desert Storm in February 1991 the U.S. decided against toppling a weakened, desperate Saddam and maintaining Iraq’s capability to constrain and thwart Iran – seen then in Washington as “America’s strategic enemy.”⁵ That carried the day while Bush was in office.

What Senior Bush had had in mind to effect - containment of Iran⁶ – was in fact instituted by the Clinton Administration, under the “Dual Containment” policy, targeting both Iraq and Iran, even if purported to envisage different treatment for each. While the administration officials considered Iraq “criminal and irredeemable,” their problem with the Islamic Republic concerned its “behavior.” The new policy “seemed to signal that, after 14 years, the US had given up on reaching out to the Islamic Republic;” it entailed, among others, economic sanctions, toughening of visa restrictions and cultural exchanges. Secretary of State Warren Christopher was known to have played a central role in the articulation and implementation of the new policy,⁷ which was followed in later years with more stringent economic and trade sanctions.

The election of President Khatami in May 1997 on a reform and détente platform offered a new opportunity for improving relations between the two countries. Clinton himself called the development “hopeful” and expressed the hope that the estrangement between the people of the two countries could be bridged. The ensuing positive ambiance and the indirect exchanges between the two presidents (1) were followed by the U.S. and Iran open expression of regret for the 1953 coup the 1979 hostage-taking (2) respectively. The promising atmosphere of the late 1990s, however, failed to bear fruit before



other factors – at both ends – intervened to change the encouraging track altogether.

The election of President George W. Bush – and the sudden move to the center of the previously marginal Neocon outlook in the American politics - followed by the atrocious events of September 11, totally changed the security environment; for the U.S., for the entire Middle East, and for Iran. Despite Iran’s immediate official categorical condemnation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., including by President Khatami himself, as well as by the majority of political parties, social organizations and government officials,⁸ Bush’s self-proclaimed “War on Terror” came to haunt the state of relations between the two countries. Iran’s quite generous support to the American military campaign in Afghanistan, in particular through supporting the Northern Alliance in defeating the Taliban in Kabul and the Al-Qaeda, and subsequent close political cooperation through the Bonn process in putting together a new government in Kabul,⁹ did in fact raise the prospects for the emergence of a different dynamism in the relations.

George W. Bush’ inclusion of Iran in the proverbial “Axis of Evil” – along with such pariah states as Iraq and North Korea – in the State of the Union Address in late January 2002 served to suddenly dash all the hopes for a possible change. To many Iranians – inclusive of government officials, diverse forces from different political and ideological persuasions, and across the society at large - the designation meant that the Bush administration was driven by ideology and bent on reshaping the entire region on the basis of an ideological blueprint – considered detrimental to the national interests of Iran.

The U.S. occupation of Iraq in March 2003 – a war of choice by any measure - generated significant debates in Iran regarding the American intentions and Iran’s position about the war – ranging from emotional/sentimental outbursts against the Ba’athist regime’s criminal record and reminiscent of bitter war time experiences and



memories to more sober-minded rational approaches driven by calculations of long-term and strategic national interests and security implications. The choice before the Islamic Republic, as debated then, was between a position of neutrality or [implicit] support for the anti-Ba'athist campaign – similar to the situation in Afghanistan. As it turned out, pro-Iran Kurds in the north and the Shi'ites in the south helped the Allied forces in their joint operations to topple Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. Prevalence of sound strategic calculations in Tehran helped the removal of another irreplaceable enemy in Iraq and the emergence of a pro-Iran ruling political coalition representing the majority bloc in the Iraqi population. The development, however viewed by others in the region, was an important change in the geopolitical matrix of strategic calculations and presented Iran with a rather peculiar mix of enhanced national interests and regional stature as well as a host of intractable sources of potential threat.

The Iranian cooperation in post-2003 Iraq, as in the Afghan case, provided another potentially conducive ambiance and opportunity for some sort of rapprochement between the two sides – inclusive of what has come to be referred to as the Iranian proposal for a Grand Bargain in May 2003. The proposal, as reported in some U.S. quarters, and purported to have enjoyed the blessing of “Iran’s highest authority,” conveyed the Iranian willingness of putting everything on the table. According to the same American sources, the “only formal response made by the White House was its criticism of the Swiss ambassador in Iran” for transmitting the Iranian “non-paper” – which was practically the last chance for any possible thaw in the relations while Khatami was still in office.

Ahmadinejad’s presidency as of summer 2005, on a platform critical of previous administrations, particularly blaming Khatami’s pro-dialogue and détente-oriented posture and policy as dovish and compromising, changed Iran’s foreign policy discourse and also the prism through which international political system was seen in Iran. With his peculiar radical-sounding discourse and unconventional



pronouncements and actions, which he claimed were intended to better represent Iran's "real power," he personally – and his administration – came to be perceived and defined in the West as hawkish and confrontational in posture and disorienting to the region and world in conduct. His letters to a number of heads of state in his early years and to Barack Obama in early 2009 attracted quite a lot of attention among officials, diplomats, pundits, and the media, both in terms of content and style – were also criticized in Iran as unconventional and uncalled for, especially when left unanswered. Reversal of Khatami's policy on the nuclear dossier led to serious widening of the differences with the Western bloc (in fact with the 5+1 as a group). While Iran's opposition to efforts at promoting the Middle East peace process stiffened, the U.S. presence and actual engagement, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in the bigger region surrounding Iran steadily increased. In the meantime, while a contest of *words and wills* with the Neocons in Washington continued unabated, Iran also proceeded with building up important security, defense and intelligence infrastructures in strategic locations across the region.

The election of President Obama, similar to the situation in the U.S., was received with strong euphoric sentiments in the region and in Iran as well. His discursive language and emphasis, both during the campaign and in his early months in office, on the "open hand" approach towards Iran created heightened expectations in Iran and generated serious debates at various levels – among officials, within the ruling elite, in academia, in the media, also among the populace at large. Compared with the earlier approach by George W. Bush and the Neocons, there existed a general consensus that Barack Obama's approach was different and held the potentials for a possible rapprochement – even if it was also judged to constitute a more formidable challenge in terms of its stronger position and efficacy in mobilizing further international pressure on a recalcitrant Iran, especially on the nuclear dispute. While some argued that the gestures



were genuine and called for reciprocity, others – mostly from the conservative bloc, from the top echelon down – tended to rely on the traditional suspicion and insisted on the imperative of demanding concrete action in support of nice-sounding discursive “rhetoric” – even as a precondition for any positive Iranian counter gesture. Much to everybody’s chagrin, before Obama’s “open hand” policy could stand a reasonable chance of being tested in actual terms, domestic developments in Iran in the post-June 2009 presidential elections created a totally new dynamism that soon changed the ball game, which was further eclipsed by the continuing impasse on the nuclear negotiations and subsequent passage of the UN Security Council resolution 1929 and the much expanded sanctions regime that ensued. The outcome of the mid-term congressional elections in the U.S. last November has for all practical purposes further constrained Obama’s space for foreign policy maneuvering. Even if it might as well create the opportunity for a stronger bi-partisan anti-Iran policy.

Looking back at a three-decade horizon, one of the enduring characteristics of the US-Iran relations since 1979 has been the mutual construction of an enemy image in both countries of the “other” that, for those in the say, reflects the will and interests of a powerful minority on the fringe of the mainstream politics. The fringe, having occupied a privileged position at and around the center, has managed – with the inadvertent assistance of its counterpart in the other country – to systematically undermine and practically render impossible any and all potential initiatives that could have improved the relationship. Also at the regional level actors have used this opportunity to receive/enhance US support in their presumably unified effort to contain the Iranian fundamentalist threat. A much-threatened Iran has also helped promote anti-U.S. challenge through supporting countries and political movements and currents unbecoming to the Islamic Republic’s ideological or even political correctness – which has faced criticism at home on grounds of cost-benefit analysis or national interest calculus [e.g., much expanded



relations with the radical and leftist governments in Latin America]. It is unfortunate, but true, that a sense of mutual obsession which cuts on both sides, domestically and internationally, has reigned supreme in both countries. Worse still, occasional attempts at a realistic assessment of the state of relations and hopes for a possible rapprochement have not survived the intensity of the past and recent legacy of hostility and mutual acrimony and frustration. The following survey of the array of current contentious issues between the two countries as well as areas of common interest could perhaps help depict a better picture of where the two sides stand or should stand.

Contentious Issues and Common Interests

The U.S.-Allied occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq and the consequent situation has led, albeit inadvertently and contrary to the original intent, to an actual power realignment in the region.

Before the U.S.-Allied military action, the regimes in Baghdad and Kabul were known for their enmity towards Iran. As discussed earlier, the new governments in both countries are considered Iran's friends. This power realignment, advances in Iran's nuclear program – despite the international controversy – and simultaneous shrinking of the resources at the U.S. disposal, both at home and in the region, have all coalesced towards the unintended emergence of an “imbalance of power” in the Persian Gulf sub-region. Indications are that Iran's projection of power, inclusive in particular of its seemingly fast developing missile program, has gradually worked to shape an image of an emerging powerful player in the eyes of ordinary people and governments of the region. The previous “balance of power” in the Persian Gulf sub-region has now transformed into an “imbalance of power” – with Iran's rising power being widely perceived at different levels within the sub-region as indisputable (Hadian, 2009). It should be cautioned, however, that the perceived reality might in fact differ from the reality itself – even substantially – but, as it often happens and in the final analysis, decisions are made on the basis of



perceptions¹⁰ in the matrix of strategic calculations.

Moreover, the previous “power imbalance” in the Middle East region at large is now in the process of transforming into a “balance of power” – or at least it is so being perceived. Israel’s power was in the past considered/perceived to be uncontested and it tended to act on that basis and perception in the region – a regional superpower. This “imbalance of power” has been changing into a “balance of power” due, in large measure, to the growing perceptions across the region of Iran’s enhanced power and geopolitical stature. Furthermore, at the regional level, the people of the region, previously humiliated for a long time by Israel’s seemingly superior might, have all but welcomed the new emergent “balance of power.” The “reality” on the ground indicates that Israel possesses the most advanced military arsenal in the region, has advanced missile systems even capable of carrying nuclear warheads¹¹, is widely believed to have a “second strike capability,” and no less important is fully backed – in fact, endorsed - by the Western powers and in particular the US. But, as Israel and its Western backers are aware, the “perceived reality” at the regional level, and especially at the popular level, may prove more important than the reality itself.¹²

As viewed from Tehran, the U.S. is the major stakeholder in the extant world order and maintaining that dominant position is considered of vital strategic interest. It is also believed in Tehran that strengthening the U.S. global hegemony has served as the guiding principle for the U.S. security, defense and foreign policies in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Along the same line of thinking, it is also analyzed that such being the case, the U.S. has been bent on preventing, at all costs, erosion of its hegemonic power and emergence of discordant regional powers whose challenge of the U.S. supremacy impedes the smooth exercise of the U.S. power and authority. George W. Bush and his Neocons contended that the “use” of military force for maintaining U.S. hegemony is legitimate.¹³

As it happened, following early U.S.-Allied victories in



Afghanistan and Iraq in toppling the old regimes bandwagoning became the order of the day for a number of countries in the region. Iran, though obviously apprehensive about the U.S. intentions and possible next moves, remained neutral and did not seek regional balancing against U.S. hegemony either. But the strategic calculus of major actors changed with the passage of time. While U.S. allies in the region experienced a sharp deficit in legitimacy, the disappearance of the Taliban and Ba'athist regimes in the two neighboring countries turned Iran into the principal beneficiary of the U.S.-Allied military campaign. The reduced U.S. material and symbolic resources in the region, concomitant with Iran's enhanced stature and bolstered security, intelligence and military infrastructures in the neighboring countries – even though primarily for deterrence purposes and also for ultimate retaliatory capability in case of a possible military attack – served to encourage the ruling power elite in Iran to act as a promoter of status quo rather than a revolutionary actor chafing for radical change at least in the medium term. In our analysis, as argued in detail elsewhere, Iran's regional foreign policy objectives have not been “revolutionary” during the past several years (Hadian and Hormozi, 2010).

Faced with the new security environment in the region and eager and anxious to restore the status quo ante – that is, re-establishment of previous unchallenged U.S. hegemony – the U.S. appears to have opted for “containment” as its main strategy vis-à-vis Iran. But, given the changed environment and the array of forces and currents involved, the U.S. goal of restoration of the past – if possible at all - is nothing short of a fundamental change in the realignment of power arrangements in the region. Such a realignment is, for all practical purposes, entangled with Iran-US relations, which, as discussed in the previous section, has proved quite difficult for both sides and has eluded normalization or rapprochement. A number of major issues of critical concern to both sides account for this sad state of affairs.



Iran's nuclear program, terrorism and radicalism, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Middle East peace process, and finally the issue of human rights, have constituted the major U.S. concerns. While the degree of relevance and significance of each element might have differed, depending on the administration in Washington and also a host of other factors and circumstances, however, collectively they have come to occupy the center piece in the U.S. approach, agenda – and needless to say, the official discourse and spin - towards Iran.

On their part, Iranians also have had their own set of issues – grievances – which have directed their posture and policy towards the U.S.: unilateral U.S. sanctions, Iranian frozen assets; deliberate disregard for Iran's regional stature and role; continuing U.S. and NATO operations in Iran's security environment, support for secessionist movements in Iran, interference in Iran's domestic affairs, and expeditious withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan and Iraq.

The above areas of serious difference – and even dispute – notwithstanding, the two countries also share common concern and interest over a number of issues and situations. They include Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, combating terrorism and extremism in the region [given the sharp difference of view on the definition of “terrorism” especially as it applies to Hamas and more so to Hezbollah], and at a more fundamental level, security in the Persian Gulf - even if for their own particular reasons - and at a more strategic level, security in the Persian Gulf, including long-term security of energy sources. On a larger scale, and from a strategic perspective, the long-term interests of both countries require – whether expressed explicitly or implied through diplomatic allusions or even coquetry - establishment or restoration of regional stability in the Middle East, the Caspian Basin and in Southwest Asia.



Alternative Strategies

In light of the preceding review of the seemingly irresolvable face-off between Iran and the U.S., we now turn to the central question this paper has set out to address: the best strategy to be adopted towards possible resolution of the outstanding issues. As viewed from Tehran and also by Iran-US pundits, three strategies of dealing with have been debated in the U.S. in recent years, of which one has been pursued in action. These three strategies are: *Comprehensive Engagement*; *Selective Engagement plus Containment*; and finally, *Military Attack*. The overriding perception, on the Iranian side, has been that the actual policy – beyond rhetoric and spin - adopted and implemented by the U.S. has been *Selective Engagement plus Containment*, which dates back to the days of former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. This was the dominant approach and policy up to the end of 2008 under George W. Bush and the Neocon team. Barack Obama’s pronounced emphasis on “open hands” posture towards Iran, both in the course of the campaign and also in the early months of his presidency, which appeared to have raised quite serious expectations at both ends, failed to sustain itself in the wake of the events in the post-June 2009 presidential elections in Iran and domestic pressures in the US. What came to pass, as a matter of fact, was that the U.S. policy reverted to the earlier policy under the Neocon team at the White House. Given the new regressive dynamism and the dashed hopes, the predominant perception in Tehran since fall 2009 has been that President Obama’s pro-change, soft posture only sought – and served - to make the previous policy more effective by repairing the tarnished U.S. international image and regaining the moral upper hand, appealing to the expanding ranks of disgruntled Iranians, and also convincing or silencing his critics at home through gradual ratcheting up of pressure on Iran following the failure of attempts at diplomacy and engagement..

The US *Containment* strategy has included: Steady ratcheting up



of a wide range of sanctions (inclusive of UN, unilateral, and by allies and like-minded countries) that target the Iranian economy with increasing focus on the energy sector; b) Political isolation and diplomatic pressure, through lining up of allies and fellow-travelers, aiming at restricting Iran's diplomatic activities and outreach and also through increasing pressures of sorts on the countries defying the American policy; c) Public diplomacy and engagement in psychological warfare, including through high-profile critical public statements at various levels directed at the government of the Islamic Republic along with public expressions of support for the opposition; d) Increasing scientific and technological restrictions on Iran, including through limiting Iranians' access to a range of science disciplines and departments, preventing export of advanced and double use technology and products, and restricting the participation of Iranian scientists in important global conferences; and e) Constraining Iran's military capabilities, among others, through banning export of advanced military hardware and even spare parts for the existing systems, and also assistance to military build-up of Iran's immediate neighbors and other countries in the region.

Selective Engagement – as part and parcel of the overall US containment strategy in dealing with Iran - has in recent years come to be understood as engagement in confidence-building measures towards resolving outstanding issues of urgency for both sides, one by one, and with the [implicit] hope that it would help the overall situation between them and move it forward, even if on a piecemeal scale. Looking back at the track record, it can be said, with a sense of certainty, that the approach has been tried before and despite some successes in a number of cases, the experience does not appear to be reassuring. A glaring example of this sort of confidence-building measure with limited goals happened a few years back with the participation of the American wrestlers in an Iranian-organized tournament, in the course of which the American flag was raised and the U.S. national anthem was played in Iran, which was almost



unthinkable then and is certainly out of question now. The nice Iranian gesture did not go any further, and all sport exchanges between the two sides have all but ceased. Other more serious confidence-building measures, such as the direct talks on Iraq in 2007, which appeared at the time to hold promising prospects came to naught – whatever the immediate cause, whether deliberately sabotaged by fringe elements and currents in either side or from other quarters in the region or just a victim of un-conducive circumstances. All in all, what appears to be sorely lacking has been – and continues to be – the necessary *political will* on both sides to undertake to address in earnest the wide gamut of outstanding issues between them and explore practical – doable – ways and means towards resolving them. Taking cue from other experiences, one could say that a process similar to the Shanghai Declaration would be appropriate to consider. As for resolving issues one by one, for example, Afghanistan or Iraq, as things stand now, the two sides do not seem to be on the same wave lengths. While these two situations have proved quite intractable and seem to be of immediate and urgent concern to the U.S. and NATO and they seem to expect Iranian cooperation, Iran, to the contrary, does not appear to be currently under tremendous pressure or feel compelled to move towards extending a helping hand. As debated in Iran – within the public sector, academia, and the media – the question has been: why should Iran help resolve a problem situation in its immediate neighborhood that would directly benefit the other side and place it in a more advantageous position in dealing with Iran than is currently the case.

The *Military Option* strategy, as the last resort strategy in dealing with Iran, particularly considering the still unresolved nuclear dossier, has been “on the table” for quite a number of years – George Bush and the Neocons kept referring to it while in office. It apparently disappeared from the Obama Administration’s radar for a short period and reappeared again as the American official discourse and spin have toughened since fall 2009. Since the days of the Bush



Administration the following three military contingency plans have attracted attention and been talked about - in the U.S. media and in the pundits' analysis.

1- The contingency plan referred to as "Surgical Operation" involves attacks on 100 to 140 targets inside Iran, with the purported objective of paralyzing – delaying - Iran's nuclear program. As widely argued by American and other sources during the past years, due to the uncertainty of the outcome, actual pursuit of the option would present an extremely difficult decision for the Americans, Israelis or even jointly. Moreover, a number of other quite risky considerations also seem to be involved, including the rather pervasive doubt as to existence of clandestine nuclear sites and facilities in Iran which would question the efficacy of any surgical operation in the first place; the quite cataclysmic political fallout in Iran which would, among others and most probably, convince or silence the political and military quarters within the Iranian power elite who oppose the weaponization of the nuclear program. Rather, the rival quarters might find it much easier and expedient to openly espouse the weaponization track as the only right path forward (Rogers, 2010).

2- The second military plan - "Massive Aerial Bombardment" - considers attacking between 1000 and 1400 targets inside Iran for a sustained period of 30 to 60 days, the purported objective of which would be to substantially cut down Iran's military-industrial-technological capability. Again, as argued by various Western sources and quarters, this is a much riskier option than the "limited" plan. Results are unknown, and moreover, possible destabilization of Iran is hardly considered in anybody's real, long-term interest. And hence, likewise, it is not expected to be any easy decision for the Israelis, Americans or NATO to make (Toukan and Cordesman, 2009).

The third military plan calls for an "All-inclusive War" which, due to a host of reasons, including lack of requisite resources available to both the U.S or NATO, could be considered practically out of question and not taken serious even by the most belligerent



supporters of the military option (Arkin, 2006) – aside, of course, from the incalculable political fallout and ramifications for the greater region surrounding Iran.

With the preceding in mind, especially the failure of the strategies of *Containment* and *Selective Engagement* on the one hand, and *impracticability or inadvisability* of the military option on the other, one would tend to conclude that *Comprehensive Engagement* might offer the best possible strategy for both sides to consider in the direction of moving towards resolving the array of outstanding issues between them. In the *Comprehensive Engagement* approach important issues, inclusive of bilateral, regional, and multilateral issues, can be raised and negotiated. With all the issues on the table, as befits a genuine negotiating process - complex, difficult and time-consuming as it would inevitably be – a range of options of resolving some disputes, cooperation in certain other issues and situations, and managing issues and situations on still others where strategic differences are involved, can be considered. As witnessed in other similar cases involving negotiation between the two adversaries, all issues should be addressed within the same time frame and same organizational framework, preferably simultaneously in a number of parallel working groups. Here, as ample previous experience shows, Track II diplomacy can be relied on as an extremely important conduit in facilitating the process and paving the way for success of the engagement strategy (Hadian, 2009).

Looking at Iran's response to the dominant U.S. approach in recent years, it appears that Iran has been pursuing a strategy of its own geared to the preservation of status quo while pressing forward – cautiously though - its geopolitical and ideological objectives, which can be termed as reactive adoption of a *Counter-Containment* strategy. But, successful maintenance of status quo calls for practical overcoming of two challenges; a) normalization of relations with the West; b) acting as a responsible regional state (Hadian and Hormozi, 2010).



Considering the nuclear program as the most contentious issue with the West proper, which also appears to have accorded Iran with a potentially valuable card, it would be reasonable to assume that any acceptable management or resolution of the issue would be linked to the overall objective of normalization of the relations with West – which, as discussed, would also involve addressing and resolution of a host of other issues. Acting as a responsible regional state also has its own requirements, inter alia, adoption of the following measures: a) establishing the necessary symbolic and material infrastructures for management and resolution of regional conflicts, b) provision of energy security as a major gas and oil producer-exporter; c) commitment to and compliance with the established international principles and norms while maintaining a critical outlook and the commitment to seek change through accepted international rules and norms, d) taking actual distance from engagement in adventurous foreign policy at regional and international levels; and e) transparency in military, trade, and banking activities.

It should be cautioned, however, that *Counter Containment*, as a reactive strategy, has proved quite costly. Its pursuit has involved increasing political, diplomatic, economic, and social costs for the country, and has, as a result, proved contentious for the ruling elite. An important segment of the Iranian elite contend that the costs involved far outweigh the presumed benefits, and call for its discontinuation and change of track. The government, supported by another segment of the elite, continue to insist that the price paid – and being paid - is necessary for safeguarding Iran's independence, dignity, and the new-found posture and status. While the government officially denigrates sanctions as ineffective and of marginal impact on the Iranian society and economy, pursuit of the *Counter Containment* strategy has involved, inter alia, active search for alternative sources for substitution regardless of cost; reliance on imports and domestic substitution at the expense of quality; coalition-making with like-minded countries in order to balance and challenge the U.S. power



and pressure; building up of defense, intelligence and security infrastructures in a number of countries for deterrence purposes or possible retaliatory action in case of external (U.S. or Israeli) military adventure; allocation of substantial resources for public diplomacy and psychological warfare geared to refuting the current prevalent tarnished image at the international level and for promoting an alternative image of Iran – the Islamic Republic - among Muslims and “oppressed people” of the world.

Conclusions

The present article has looked into the state of relations between Iran and the U.S. since 1979, during which both sides have continued on a tangent of conflictual relations and have practically exhausted all the space for proxy war between them. Since the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan in 2001 and the subsequent war of choice in Iraq in 2003 they have become not only virtual but real physical neighbors. In the absence of diplomatic-political relations, they have entered into a new cycle and dynamism of interaction, characterized by direct proximity and dogged competition over stature and influence in the region surrounding Iran, which is qualitatively different from what they had experienced up until then.

The strategies the U.S. has pursued over the past three decades in dealing with the revolutionary Iran - Containment, and Selective Engagement - have simply failed to bear fruit. Military Attack, as an option espoused by the Bush Administration, which has also come to be kept on the table by a hastily disillusioned Obama Administration, does not appear to offer any viable, practical solution to the U.S. Iran predicament. Continued harping in Washington on a practically undoable option, whether by the Administration or its Republican critics and detractors, especially Neocons or the Israeli lobby, has hardly helped or will help the American quandary. Failed U.S. strategies have also pushed Iran into the zealous pursuit of a reactive, costly anti-U.S. Counter Containment survival strategy – which does not promise or



augur well for any movement towards a rapprochement or reconciliation.

With the failure of various strategies to resolve the outstanding issues and substantial differences between the two sides, and given the new dynamism and the intractability of the ever-heightening tension between them, especially on Iran's controversial nuclear program, the prospects and options available to them appear to be increasingly limited to either a direct confrontation with incalculable and catastrophic consequences or a major reconciliation – from which both sides stand to reap long-term strategic benefits. An Iran-US rapprochement, when and if it becomes a reality, will undoubtedly serve to help promote peace and stability in the region, particularly in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and the Caucasus, and on larger scale in the Greater Middle East. Since the continued conflict between Tehran and Washington has cast its long shadow over a host of regional issues and situations and has further complicated them, an ultimate rapprochement between them – sooner or later, better sooner than otherwise - will inevitably help ameliorate quite a number of these intrinsically complex issues and situations – currently unthinkable or taboo for all practical purposes.

All things considered, and looking to the future notwithstanding an almost bleak immediate picture, one cannot but espouse the hope that the two sides will come to the realization that Comprehensive Engagement, the only strategy not pursued thus far by either side, offers the potentials for an eventual exit from the decades-old impasse and prevent a devastating ultimate confrontation. Comprehensive Engagement, complex, difficult, and time-consuming as it will inevitably be, is nonetheless predicated, first and foremost, on *political will* in both capitals. It is granted that breaking out of the hardened mold and psyche of the familiar mutual demonization policy – in both countries – will prove challenging, and die-hard proponents of old, albeit futile, past approaches and policies will militate against the movement towards a future-looking, proactive



alternative strategy of talking to – and negotiating with – the former adversary-tuned-interlocutor. As in similar processes in the past, Track II Diplomacy can play a critical catalytic role in the early stages of the process. We close the article on this hopeful note.

Notes

1. We are deeply grateful to Professor Mohiaddin Mesbahi for careful reading and generous comments on an earlier draft of the paper, including in providing to us a number of concepts of pivotal significance for our analysis.
2. Look at Ruhollah Ramazani (2002), Farideh Farhi (2001), Mohsen Milani (2003).
3. The American policy also involved the traditional concern for the safe, unimpeded passage of oil from the Persian Gulf as well as to reassure regional allies vis-a-vis the “Iranian Menace” and of American support in time of need.
4. As part of the efforts to reestablish his authority and credibility – at home and abroad – the Reagan administration adopted a more hawkish and openly hostile policy towards Iran by, inter alia, providing satellite intelligence to Iraq, direct military engagement in the Persian Gulf, destroying Iran’s oil platforms, providing security for oil tankers also through re-flagging, and military action against the Iranian Navy (April 1988). The Vincennes’ shooting down of an Iranian passenger plane in early July 1988 over the Persian Gulf waters – whose rationale is yet to established – came to prove instrumental in convincing the Iranians of the imperative of settling for the acceptance of the Security Council resolution 598 – which they had refused to do since its passage back in July 1987 while they had the clear upper hand in the War.
5. As reported then in the U.S. media and subsequently corroborated in the statements and writings of American political and military officials, including General Colin Powell, this was how the U.S. chose to act at the time. Based on a CIA analysis in March 1992, “With Iraq weakened and contained, Iran seemed reconfirmed as ‘America’s strategic enemy’, with whom only tactical deals could be done.”
6. George Bush wrote later in his memoirs, that his administration “could have pursued a policy of dual containment...by going it alone. And going it alone would not have worked” – which Clinton and his team believed it would.
7. The rich literature on Iran-US relations point to the interesting fact that Secretary Christopher’s bitter personal experience of dealing with the hostage question back in 1979-80 – and with the post-revolutionary Iranians – had shaped his extremely negative attitude towards Iran and Iranians. He saw Iran “not as a diplomatic abstraction but a living menace.”
8. Hours after the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, many Iranian citizens expressed



sympathy with the victims' families and the Americans in general, and a large crowd of young people held candle-light vigil in one of Tehran's famous squares.

9. Then Under-Secretary of State Richard Armitage termed the assistance as "very significant Iranian cooperation."
10. It should be pointed out we do not have direct access to reality; rather the "reality" is "perceived" via our minds.
11. Israel is generally believed to possess at least 200 nuclear warheads.
12. For the sources playing up the "Iranian threat" see, for example, Sokolski, 2004; Clawson, 2008; Eisenstadt, 2005; and Timmerman, 2005.
13. Look, for example, at Wolfowitz, 2009; Bolton, 2009; Perle, 2006.

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