

## To Keep the Peace with Iran, Threaten to Strike

While Iran's nuclear program has been on America's foreign policy agenda for the last twenty-plus years, one gets the unmistakable feeling that the issue is finally coming to a head. After several years of slowly ratcheting up sanctions while seeking to shield the Iranian people and their own economies from harm, the United States and the European Union have gone for the economic jugular by targeting Iranian oil exports. On December 31, 2011, President Obama signed into law sanctions, passed overwhelmingly by the U.S. Congress, that impose penalties on any foreign bank—including any central bank—that conducts petroleum transactions with Iran. The European Union took an even more dramatic step, imposing an embargo on the purchase of Iranian oil by its member states.

With these sanctions, the decades-old conflict between Iran and the West has entered a new and more dangerous phase in 2012. The Iranian regime's immediate reaction to the new U.S. sanctions was to threaten to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the world's oil passes and upon whose safe operation global oil prices, and thus the global economy, depend. That Iran would be driven to such threats is predictable. Oil exports comprise about 65 percent of its budget revenues, and the new measures—much more than previous sanctions—threaten the regime's economic foundation.<sup>1</sup> With their bellicose rhetoric, Iranian leaders are telling the West that they are able to repay any economic pain inflicted upon Iran. They are also, however, revealing their anxiety about the new sanctions.

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**After 20+ years, one gets the unmistakable feeling that the Iran issue is finally coming to a head.**

So will these new, robust sanctions be the means by which the United States finally achieves its goals of compelling Iran to suspend its enrichment of uranium and enter into serious talks aimed at quelling international concerns over Iranian nuclear activities? Despite Iran's on-again, off-again talks with the so-called P5+1 powers—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States as well as Germany—the United States currently seems unlikely to meet these goals. It is not merely the toughness of sanctions or the sincerity of American overtures that will determine the outcome of U.S. efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Rather, success depends on whether key allies—notably China and Israel—deem supporting the U.S. approach to advance their national interests, and whether Iran sees continuing its confrontational policies as potentially disastrous to its own. The current U.S. strategy is therefore incomplete. To achieve its goals, the United States must clearly articulate what its red lines are in terms of Iranian behavior and credibly threaten Iran with military action should it cross those lines.

### **Why Recent Efforts to Stop Iran Have Failed**

The United States and its allies seek to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis by both preventing a nuclear-armed Iran and avoiding a military conflict. In its present form, the U.S. strategy to accomplish these goals has two prongs: talks and sanctions.

While “engagement” with Iran was cast as novel during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, American presidents have in fact been seeking constructive dialogue with Tehran since the 1979 Islamic revolution. From the arms-for-hostages talks of the 1980s to the backchannel diplomacy of the 1990s to the multilateral talks over Iraq of the 2000s to today's nuclear discussions, the object of U.S.–Iran contacts has varied, but the results—or more accurately, the lack thereof—have been consistently disappointing. Nevertheless, President Obama entered office determined to reinvigorate U.S. outreach to Iran, and spent his first year seeking to tempt Iranian leaders into dialogue while refraining from imposing any new sanctions or taking other steps which could be deemed provocative.

President Obama's outreach to Iran yielded no more success than that of his predecessors, and the United States by and large reverted diplomatically to the confines of the P5+1. The P5+1 has offered Iran a path, enshrined in multiple

UN resolutions, for entering into nuclear negotiations. According to this offer, the UN Security Council would suspend the implementation of sanctions against Iran, while Iran would suspend its enrichment of uranium and other nuclear activities. The P5+1's precondition, though it arguably presents an impediment to talks, is viewed by the group as vital to ensuring that Iran cannot simply use talks as a delaying tactic (as it has so far) while it continues to make nuclear progress in the background.

While the price for talks—suspension of enrichment—has never explicitly changed, the West has on occasion offered concessionary terms in an effort to help the regime save face. In 2008, the P5+1 floated the so-called “freeze for freeze” initiative, whereby Iran would halt the expansion of its enrichment program and the UN Security Council would halt consideration of new sanctions as a first step toward the full suspension required in the resolutions. In October 2009, the Vienna Group—France, Russia, and the United States acting on behalf of the P5+1—offered to exchange Iran's low-enriched uranium (LEU) stock for highly-enriched uranium (HEU) fuel plates needed to operate the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). This step was widely seen as softening the requirement that Iran suspend uranium enrichment, as it appeared to implicitly legitimize or forgive Iran's production of LEU.

In the P5+1 approach, the offer of talks is presented as a sort of off-ramp from escalating pressure, as it is explicitly paired with the threat of international sanctions. Indeed, the first UN Security Council resolution to lay out this approach, Resolution 1696 in July 2006, itself contained no sanctions, merely the threat of them. But Iran has never taken the off-ramp proffered by the West; far from entertaining Western demands, Iran has countered with its own, insisting that the P5+1 drop their sanctions and acknowledge Iran's right to enrich before talks take place. Thus, the warning of sanctions was quickly followed up in December 2006 by the imposition of sanctions in Resolution 1737. As Iran continued to defy international demands, the Security Council continued to add sanctions against Iran through September 2008, though at a decreasing rate, reflecting the diplomatic difficulties in successfully negotiating more stringent measures.

The sanctions were intended not just to have a direct effect on Iranian finances and procurement efforts, but also to serve as a signal of Western resolve and determination. But as the Iranian regime proved similarly resolute in its efforts to push ahead with its nuclear program, Western policymakers faced a

**The current U.S. strategy is incomplete; the U.S. must present Iran with a credible military threat.**

dilemma: U.S. and European officials desired sanctions that were both effective, to sharpen Iran's sense of vulnerability, and broadly multilateral, to sharpen its sense of isolation. These aims have proven to be at odds with one another. UN sanctions accomplished the latter, but were generally weak and involved lengthy negotiations, undermining effectiveness. Unilateral or ad hoc multilateral sanctions could be tougher, but at the expense of Russian and Chinese support. This detracted not only from the show of international unanimity, but also from the sanctions' impact, as Chinese firms could backfill business foregone by Western counterparts.

As Iran's nuclear program has advanced, so too has the American, European, and Israeli sense of urgency; and as sanctions have become tougher, so too has securing Russian and Chinese support. It is these twin dynamics that resulted in the adoption of oil sanctions by the United States and the European Union in December 2011—measures that hold great promise but also carry economic risk, prompting displeasure if not outright opposition in Moscow and Beijing.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the new measures also seemed to create unease in the Obama administration, which worried about their possible effects on global oil markets. The U.S. sanctions contained in the National Defense Authorization Act were championed not by the White House but by Congress, which passed them with a veto-proof majority over the objections of administration officials, despite the fact that the legislation had already been diluted at the administration's request.<sup>2</sup> The EU sanctions were the product not of American but French prodding. In a November 21, 2011 letter to President Obama and several other leaders, French President Nicolas Sarkozy pleaded for stronger sanctions, asserting that “we cannot confine ourselves to announcing a modest increase in sanctions, which Iran can continue to ignore or bypass. . . this time we must impose sanctions of unprecedented magnitude to convince Iran that it must negotiate.”<sup>3</sup>

For the Iranian regime, these new sanctions set up a critical decision. Faced with the loss of some or even—if international compliance is robust—most of its oil revenues, the regime has essentially two options. On one hand, it could finally agree to negotiate on the terms set by the UN Security Council by suspending its uranium enrichment and agreeing to come clean about (and probably accept severe limitations on) its nuclear activities. On the other, it could continue to resist international pressure, perhaps opting to expel international inspectors, and dramatically accelerate its push for a nuclear weapon in the hope that the oil sanctions are the last arrow in the West's quiver.

There is little sign that Tehran is ready to agree to the demands it has thus far rejected. Indeed, the regime may feel increasingly constrained from doing so. The nuclear question is one on which it has staked not just its external security, but its domestic legitimacy. Iran's leaders have sought to turn “nuclear rights”

into a national rallying cry, both figuratively and literally—at (certainly stage-managed) pro-regime rallies, participants can be found holding signs referring to these supposed rights. For Iran’s leaders to back down now, in the face of withering pressure, would be to admit defeat. And this defeat would be especially hard to swallow for a leadership that has faced increasing domestic opposition and internal fissures since the outbreak of street protests in June 2009. As the regime’s base of support has become narrower and more hardline, its room for maneuver on any compromise with the West has likely diminished.

Indeed, there are strong signs that the Iranian regime—and in particular its Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei—sees any significant accommodation with the West as threatening, rather than appealing. Khamenei has said that “relations would provide the possibility to the Americans to infiltrate Iran and would pave the way for their intelligence and spy agents,” and even when he authorized trilateral U.S.–Iran–Iraq talks in 2007 asserted that “the talks will only be about the responsibilities of the occupiers in Iraq.”<sup>4</sup>

Relying as does any authoritarian regime on control—of travel, information, commerce, etc.—and repression for its rule, the Iranian regime worries about the ultimate consequences of any opening to the West. Even if Iran’s leaders came to believe that the West did not seek regime change, they would likely worry that the erosion of the regime’s foundation would be the inevitable result of cooperation with the United States, whatever Washington’s motives. Indeed, Khamenei has warned that American culture is perhaps more dangerous than a military attack, as it would lead to “moral corruption” and ultimately the decay of the clerical system of rule.<sup>5</sup> While many Iranians—most of whom were not alive to experience the Pahlavi era or the 1979 revolution—may disagree with such views, Iran’s apparent political paralysis likely would make it difficult for alternative approaches to gain traction. Indeed, it appears that the October 2009 TRR deal—a modest initiative which did not even address the core nuclear dispute, much less U.S.–Iran relations—was accepted by Iranian negotiators in Vienna only to meet the resistance of both hardliners and opposition leaders in Tehran.

Just as Tehran may see little to gain in complying with Western demands, it may doubt that the recently-enacted oil sanctions will be carried out with vigor or be as damaging as predicted. As previously noted, the Obama administration successfully persuaded Congress to include in the U.S. sanctions legislation various exemptions and waivers that could very well result in few if any sanctions actually being imposed under the new authorities. President Obama, in signing the legislation despite the administration’s misgivings, specifically noted in a “signing statement” that he did not feel bound to implement fully the new Iran sanctions, prompting protests by the Senate sponsors of the legislation.<sup>6</sup>

As for the EU oil embargo, while it appears more airtight than the new U.S. measures, its implementation was delayed by at least six months, and it appears to leave open the possibility that Iran's major EU oil customers, for example Greece, would be afforded even more time to find alternate sources of supply. Given the bleak economic situation that the International Monetary Fund predicts will face Europe in 2012, Iran may judge that the European Union will prioritize its own recovery over oil sanctions that hold the possibility of driving up commodity prices.

Of course, Iran's major oil customers are neither in North America nor Europe, but Asia—China, India, Japan, and South Korea foremost among them. India has indicated that it will not comply with the U.S. and EU sanctions, though recent history suggests that Indian refineries may encounter difficulties in paying their Iranian suppliers.<sup>7</sup> China has also indicated its non-compliance with the new U.S. sanctions, despite the Obama administration's decision (announced, significantly, while Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao was in the Middle East) to impose sanctions on the petroleum firm Zhuhai Zhenrong for violating the U.S. extraterritorial ban on firms sending refined petroleum to Iran. Some reports have emphasized the apparent reduction in Chinese oil purchases from Iran in January and February of 2012 compared to the same months in 2011, as well as Wen's courting of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf suppliers during a January 2012 trip to the region. But this analysis selectively ignores two important factors—first, China's oil imports from Iran in 2011 were 30 percent higher than in 2010, despite the fact that its overall oil imports were up only six percent.<sup>8</sup> This means that China has been growing more, not less, reliant on Iranian supplies. In addition, China's overall demand for imported oil appears certain to increase, meaning that it may see a need for a constant or even increased level of Iranian imports, even if Iran's share of its total imports declines.

Thus, a confluence of factors has stymied the efforts of the United States and its allies to halt Iran's nuclear progress. Tehran has evinced no interest in the negotiations offered by the United States and its allies. This means that U.S. policy essentially boils down to sanctions, but those sanctions too have failed to sway Iran. Chinese cooperation—the one thing that could dramatically increase the impact of those sanctions—has proven elusive. The Obama administration's hope is that time remains before Iran develops a nuclear weapon to ameliorate these problems, but it faces an additional challenge: the prospect of a unilateral, preemptive Israeli attack on Iran. U.S. officials fear that an Israeli attack would be relatively ineffective, spark regional conflict, and prematurely bring U.S. diplomatic efforts to a grinding and unsuccessful halt. The United States is faced with a quandary, to say the least.

## The Missing Element of U.S. Strategy

Resolving this quandary requires introducing a third element (in addition to sanctions and the offer of negotiations) to the Obama administration's Iran policy, which it has so far downplayed: the threat of force. While President Obama has stated on several occasions, including in his January 2012 State of the Union address, that he will "take no options off the table" with respect to Iran, there is a significant difference between making such statements and imbuing them with credibility.<sup>9</sup>

### The Absence of Credible Threats Today

The January 2012 spike in tensions in the Persian Gulf, following the imposition of new U.S. sanctions, illustrates this difference clearly. With Iran threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz or target U.S. warships, military conflict seemed suddenly and alarmingly near. The natural, almost automatic, diplomatic response in such a situation is to seek to de-escalate tensions, and this is precisely what the United States did. U.S. military spokesmen were cautious and vague in their responses. They acknowledged Iran's ability to close the Strait, with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey stating that Iran had "invested in capabilities that could, in fact, for a period of time block the Straits (*sic*) of Hormuz."<sup>10</sup> General Dempsey also emphasized the illegality of such an act by Iran, and the intention and capability of the United States and its allies of reopening the Strait, stating "We've invested in capabilities to ensure that if [Iran closes the Strait], we can defeat that. . . [W]e've described that as an intolerable act. And it's not just intolerable for us, it's intolerable to the world."<sup>11</sup> But U.S. officials remained vague on how the United States would respond in such a circumstance, or its consequences for the survival of the Iranian regime or its nuclear enterprise.

The U.S. responses immediately following Iran's threats to close the Strait seemed narrowly aimed at reassuring markets as well as allies of the continued U.S. commitment to freedom of navigation through the Strait. They did not, however, appear designed to brush Iran back from its bellicose behavior. Indeed, the Obama administration's statements and actions prior to and following the Iranian threats have seemed designed to reassure Tehran. For example, on December 2, 2011, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta used the occasion of a speech at a Washington think tank to outline the arguments against war with Iran in detail, effectively characterizing a U.S. or Israeli strike on Iran as of limited utility at best and catastrophic for U.S. interests at worst.<sup>12</sup> While it is appropriate that senior U.S. officials would want to avoid war, Secretary Panetta's remarks were notable for their emphasis on the danger of potential

U.S. or Israeli military action, rather than on the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program or the determination of the United States to halt Iran's progress.

Behind the scenes, on January 15, 2012, the United States and Israel cancelled a large missile defense exercise that had been scheduled for mid-January. The official reason given for the cancellation was that it had come at Israel's request due to resource constraints. However, the move was widely seen as targeted at mollifying Iran. This suspicion was reinforced by the revelation—by Iranian officials, tellingly—that President Obama had written a letter to Khamenei in the wake of the Gulf tensions. According to Iranian officials, the letter conveyed both a warning that closing the Strait was a red line for the United States, as well as an offer of unconditional, direct talks. While the United States confirmed the fact of the communication—through three separate channels—U.S. officials provided little confirmation or denial regarding Iranian claims about the letter's substance.<sup>13</sup>

The strenuous American efforts to ease the tensions and reassure Iran, while understandable, were counterproductive. If Iran's intention in issuing its threats was to gauge the U.S. appetite for conflict, it can only have been comforted by the response. It revealed a superpower not girding itself, even reluctantly, for a military conflict, but scrambling to avoid one, seemingly bent on convincing itself and others that a war would be futile. This episode likely only underscored what Iran may see as the United States' diminishing appetite or capacity for conflict, a perception fueled by the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, its impending withdrawal from Afghanistan, large planned cuts to the U.S. defense budget as well as the size of U.S. forces, and the backseat approach the United States took (and celebrated) in Libya.

Ironically, downplaying the threat of force may increase the odds that the

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United States will be left with little choice but either to employ force or accept an Iranian nuclear weapons capability. While Washington and its allies clearly and appropriately see military action as a last resort, this should not imply that establishing the credibility of the threat of force be left to a later, final phase of their approach to Iran. Indeed, the threat of force is not an alternative to sanctions or negotiations, but a *complement* to them in forming a coherent Iran strategy.

#### **Getting China and Israel On Board**

Soft-peddling the military threat undermines the United States' overall Iran strategy by reducing prospects for Chinese or Israeli cooperation as well as the likelihood that Iran will choose to negotiate. Each appears to assess that it is far



from certain that the United States will, in the final analysis, prove willing to conduct a military strike on Iran. If Washington were to take the opposite tack and bolster the threat of force, however, it could lead China, Israel, and Iran to modify their approaches based on reassessments of how U.S. policy affects their national interests.

Israel, like the United States, worries both about a nuclear-armed Iran and the prospect of military conflict with Iran. Unlike the United States, however, Israel considers an Iranian nuclear weapons capability to be an “existential threat.”<sup>14</sup> This is due in part to Iran’s direct threats against Israel, such as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s famous threat to “wipe Israel off the map,” Khamenei’s admission in February 2012 that Iran supports any and all groups which attack Israel, or an article by a prominent hardline scholar, Ahmad Tavakoli, arguing the necessity of an Iranian attack on Israel. But it is also because of the ripple effects an Iranian nuclear weapons capability would have on both Tehran’s own regional adventurism and on the intentions of other regional states to seek nuclear weapons. While Israeli officials, like their U.S. counterparts, would prefer that some combination of sanctions and other measures persuade Iran to change course, they have little confidence that sanctions will succeed and thus contemplate the use of force.

A key consideration for Israeli and U.S. officials alike is the “window of opportunity” to conduct an effective attack on Iran, based on a number of factors. Key among them is the military capability of the state conducting the strike. Israeli officials are undoubtedly aware that U.S. capability is greater, which for Israel is a blessing and a curse: a blessing because this means a U.S.-led attack could be more effective than an Israeli attack (in addition to attracting less strenuous regional and international condemnation), and a curse because the United States, like Israel, is apt to wait until the latest possible date to conduct an attack, which because of the United States’ greater military capability is later than in Israel’s case. This means that the passage of time and progress of Iran’s nuclear capabilities will eventually result in the Iranian program being still vulnerable to a U.S. attack but out of Israel’s reach. This leads to a straightforward calculation for Israel: if it trusts the United States to carry out a timely and effective attack, it will defer its own action in the hope that conflict can be avoided; if that trust is lacking, its interests demand a unilateral attack before the opportunity to do so is foreclosed. Establishing and maintaining this trust requires that the U.S. military threat be credible.

For China, Iran is both a vital energy supplier and a key strategic partner. As noted above, China’s oil imports are large and growing. In 2010, China imported

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4.8 million barrels per day (mbpd) of oil, an increase of 17 percent from 2009 levels, making it the world's second-largest importer of oil after the United States. Chinese oil consumption is growing rapidly, and imports as a share of consumption are projected by the U.S. Energy Information Administration to rise from 50 percent today to 72 percent in 2035.<sup>15</sup> China receives nearly half of its oil imports from the Middle East, where Saudi Arabia was its number-one and Iran its number-two supplier in 2010.<sup>16</sup> While this alone provides China with a powerful disincentive against alienating Tehran, it is hardly the full story.

Prominent Chinese defense intellectuals have characterized China as being engaged in a budding strategic rivalry with the United States, and they have specifically observed that Iran—occupying a strategic position in a vital region and, unlike Saudi Arabia, owing nothing to the United States—could be an important partner in this rivalry. For example, Major General Zhang Shiping, affiliated with China's Academy of Military Sciences, has suggested that Iran could serve as a strategic location for a Chinese military base.<sup>17</sup> As a result of these economic and strategic motivations, Beijing has been careful to maintain strong ties with Tehran, providing it with material and diplomatic support, while doing just enough to comply with international sanctions to avoid conflict with the United States.

China would need to reassess its approach to Iran, however, if it deemed the threat of a U.S. strike on Iran to be credible. Such an attack would complicate Beijing's economic and strategic interests alike by presenting it with a prospect worse than complying with sanctions. A conflict in the Gulf could both drive up energy prices, a vital consideration for China as a major oil importer, and at least temporarily cut off the export of oil from Iran entirely. Such a conflict could also end with the demise of the Iranian regime and its replacement with one oriented toward the West, or at least less friendly to Chinese interests.

### **What Iran Would Hear**

As for the Iranian regime itself, which would after all be the actual target of U.S. military threats, its foremost interest appears to be its own survival. As previously noted, acceding to Western demands is likely viewed within the regime as a threat to that interest. Undoubtedly, sanctions—especially the new sanctions—have contributed to economic hardship in Iran. The latest and most dramatic evidence has been the rapid devaluation of the Iranian currency and a resulting spike in inflation in Iran. However, it is not clear that this has increased political pressure on the regime to change course on the nuclear issue, or that the regime would in any event heed such pressure. The regime's past behavior suggests both that it is disdainful of public opinion—decisions are after all ultimately made by a single man, Khamenei—and that it is prepared to allow the Iranian people to endure great suffering in pursuit of the regime's objectives,

as demonstrated by Tehran's resistance to a ceasefire late in the Iran–Iraq war despite mounting casualties and an apparent stalemate.

If the regime views caving in to pressure or rapprochement with the West as a threat to its domestic standing, it appears to view the nuclear program as sufficiently vital to its security to incur great cost and risk to see it through. The regime will note that Pakistan saw international pressure decrease not long after it tested a nuclear weapon, and that North Korea has used its own nuclear arsenal effectively as a deterrent, while Libya and Iraq, which abandoned nuclear weapons or failed to achieve them, found themselves targets of military attack. Some have suggested that Western sanctions fuel Iran's insecurity, and that therefore dropping them would diminish its desire for nuclear weapons, but such analysis is solipsistic. The regime's worries originate not with the Western sanctions campaign, but flow from its own confrontational approach to its neighbors and domestic insecurity. A nuclear weapon would presumably not only deter aggression against Iran and give it a freer hand in the region, but it would also give the West a vested interest in stability in Iran (as opposed to, say, fomenting unrest or revolution), much as the West has sought stability on the Korean peninsula in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death.

While the United States cannot undo these lessons of history, it can sharpen the choice faced by the regime by credibly threatening military force and thereby signaling that oil sanctions are not in fact the last arrow in the Western quiver. Indeed, the only thing that might be worse in the regime's view than acceding to Western demands at the negotiating table would be a military defeat. While many analysts have predicted that Iranians would rally around the flag in the case of war, they would not necessarily rally around a regime that had brought economic ruin and military humiliation to a once-proud and prosperous nation. The regime will be aware of the role that such defeats or perceptions of humiliation played in the demise of their predecessors, including the Qajar dynasty in the early 20th century, Reza Shah in the mid-20th century, and the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979, which Iran's current rulers themselves upended. The regime's domestic foes—who are numerous and not insignificant—could condemn a U.S. attack and in the same breath condemn Khamenei and his recklessness for exposing Iran to such confrontation. Indeed, the fact that the Iranian regime has struck at the United States only through proxies and asymmetric means suggests the regime understands what an outright conflict would mean for its survival.

### **What Would a Credible Military Threat Look Like?**

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Restoring U.S. military credibility will require more than throwaway lines about “all options” being “on the table.” It will instead require three things. First, it will require specificity—the United States must be clear about its nuclear red

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lines—far clearer than Secretary Panetta’s statement that “our red line to Iran is not to get a nuclear weapon,”<sup>18</sup> which seemed to suggest that an Iranian nuclear weapons capability was only a concern if a bomb were actually assembled. In addition, the United States must be equally clear about the consequences for the Iranian regime if it crosses those red lines. A credible threat should specify

that the United States has the will and capability to destroy Iran’s nuclear and military infrastructure should Iran’s defiance of its international obligations continue.

Second, it will require consistency—U.S. officials across the board will need to cease their public musings on the downsides of a military attack and deliver a uniform and disciplined message about Washington’s willingness to use force if required. The lack of message discipline comes across clearly in comments made by General Dempsey after Secretary Panetta’s December 2011 remarks regarding the downsides of military action. Asked to talk about the possible downsides of a U.S. strike on Iran, Dempsey averred, stating that he would “rather not discuss the degree of difficulty and in any way encourage [Iran] to read anything into that.”<sup>19</sup> His comments are an implicit rebuke of his civilian superiors’ readiness to offer the detail that he was reluctant to provide.

Third, the threat must be backed up by actions aimed at convincing Iran and others that Washington’s warnings are not mere rhetoric. A task force convened by the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) recently issued several recommendations along these lines. They suggest bolstering the capabilities of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain, to include an additional Carrier Battle Group and a Mine Countermeasures Squadron. Such steps would be further strengthened by the deployment of a Special Forces “mothership” to the region, as the U.S. military is reportedly considering. BPC also suggests conducting military exercises to demonstrate the U.S. ability to overcome Iran’s preferred tactics, such as “swarming attacks” by small boats; bolstering the offensive military capabilities of Gulf states, which should be accompanied by an intensification of the U.S. regional strategic dialogue with those states; and the prepositioning of U.S. military hardware in the region, such as the Massive Ordnance Penetrator bunker-buster bomb.

Such an approach presupposes, of course, that the United States is prepared to follow through on such threats. Establishing a credible military threat can, as previously noted, head off the need to actually conduct military operations by providing a potential adversary advance warning of the consequences of continued provocation. But it also forces the state issuing the threat, should

its adversary cross the specified red lines, either to follow through with the threatened response or back down and suffer a humiliating loss of credibility. By characterizing a nuclear-armed Iran as “unacceptable,” and an eventuality the United States is “determined to prevent,” President Obama and his predecessors have already staked American credibility on the outcome. And there is good reason to believe that any U.S. administration, Democratic or Republican, would find military action against Iran preferable to acquiescence to a nuclear-armed Iran.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to bear in mind, nevertheless, that the purpose of telegraphing a credible military threat is to head off a conflict, not to spark one. While recent tensions in the Gulf, particularly between Iran and Israel, have given rise to worries of regional war, that risk is stoked by the absence of a credible U.S. military threat, not the existence of one. Lacking confidence in U.S. resolve, regional allies who are deeply concerned about Iran’s capabilities and intentions but who lack the United States’ resources—whether Israel or the Gulf states—may take it upon themselves to act, forcing the United States into a conflict on terms that are not Washington’s own. A credible U.S. military threat would calm those allies and reduce the risk of premature conflict.

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On the other hand, there is good historical reason to believe that if presented with a serious and imminent threat of U.S. attack, combined with existing pressures, Tehran may back down. Many observers argue it was the downing (albeit accidental) of a civilian Iranian airliner by the USS *Vincennes* that prompted Iran finally to agree to a ceasefire with Iraq in the late 1980s. And the possibility of a “right turn” by the U.S. Army from Iraq into Iran may well have prompted Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment and nuclear weaponization research and enter into talks with the European Union in 2003.

## **Credible Threats Help**

Thus, while a “sanctions-only” policy is unlikely to garner the support of key allies and partners, such as Israel and China, or lead Iran to shift course, supplementing sanctions and outreach with a credible military threat could bring the interests of the United States, China, Israel, and other allies into alignment and cause the Iranian regime to reassess its own. Establishing and sustaining the credibility of the U.S. military threat will be no easy feat, and the Obama administration—widely perceived as uninterested in additional conflicts—begins in a deep hole. The Obama administration has taken a

sequential approach to its Iran policy—starting with a near-exclusive emphasis on “engagement,” then shifting to the current singular focus on sanctions, and leaving serious discussion of military action for a later, fateful day.

For the United States to succeed in the face of Iranian nuclear resolve, however, U.S. policymakers must cease thinking of diplomacy, sanctions, and force as distinct options, but instead as mutually-supporting elements of a single, coherent strategy. There is a common misconception that diplomacy is largely a matter of interpersonal skills and polished argumentation. However, while some of America’s finest diplomats have indeed been known for their finesse, others—like the late Richard Holbrooke—were unapologetically blunt and willing to employ force when necessary. Holbrooke’s diplomatic success in Bosnia was made possible by the United States’ use of force, which at his urging went well beyond what the United Nations and NATO had previously utilized. However, at the time, a *New York Times* editorial remarked that “diplomacy is clearly the better course,” and that Holbrooke “risk[ed] becoming the latest intermediary to fail at Balkan diplomacy.”<sup>21</sup> Their tactics may differ wildly from one case to the next, but what all successful diplomats have in common is a dealmaker’s understanding of the key interests of foes and allies alike, and how to use the full range of policy tools to appeal to—or threaten—those interests to produce a desired outcome. Iran will only choose negotiations over nuclearization when it worries about the consequences of doing otherwise.

## Notes

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