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POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

Volume 122 · Number 2 · Summer 2007

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Political Science Quarterly

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Iran's Nuclear Challenge

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Four years after the United States went to war to disarm Saddam Hussein's Iraq, it faces a far more dangerous and real proliferation crisis in Iran. Should the Islamic Republic cross the nuclear threshold in defiance of the international community and its long-standing treaty commitments, it would effectively undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that has been the mainstay of global counterproliferation efforts for nearly four decades. Indeed, a nuclear Iran, with its expressed antagonism toward the United States, would be in a far better position to assert its regional influence, altering both the strategic and the political alignments of the Middle East.

Why does Iran want the bomb? What impact has the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had on Iran's nuclear deliberations? Is there anything the United States and the international community can do to press Iran toward restraining its ambitions? The answer to these questions requires a better understanding of the interlocking calculations that have propelled Iran toward the nuclear option in the first place.

REVELATIONS AND CONTINUITIES

Iran's nuclear ambitions did not begin with the onset of the Islamic revolution in 1979. The nuclear program actually started in the early 1970s under the Shah, who, with the assistance of West Germany, France, and South Africa, sought to construct an infrastructure of nuclear power plants. Approximately \$40 billion was earmarked for this ambitious project, whose purpose was the construction of at least twenty reactors. Suspicion lingered that behind the Shah's declared desire for nuclear energy lay a determination to construct

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nuclear weapons. Indeed, the Shah's former foreign minister, Ardeshir Zahedi, has all but confirmed such concerns, noting that

the Iranian strategy at that time was aimed at creating what is known as surge capacity, that is to say . . . the know-how, the infrastructure and the personnel needed to develop a nuclear military capacity within a short time without actually doing so. But the assumption within the policymaking elite was that Iran should be in a position to develop and test a nuclear device within 18 months.¹

Akbar Etemad, the director of Iran's nuclear program at the time of the monarchy, similarly endorses Zahedi's claim that the Shah's program was designed to grant him the option of assembling the bomb should his regional competitors move in that direction.²

As the theocratic regime is quick to point out, Washington was not only complicit in the Shah's program but never asked, as it persistently does today, why an oil-rich state requires nuclear power. Moreover, the European states that currently are calling on Iran to suspend its enrichment activities were busy selling the Shah the needed technology for construction of an elaborate network of nuclear plants that could have been easily misused for military purposes. The belated Western concerns regarding Iran's proliferation tendencies add to Tehran's arguments regarding the hypocrisy of the great powers and the iniquitous nature of the NPT.

During the initial decade of the Islamic Republic, the regime's preoccupations with consolidating power, the war with Iraq, and its international isolation precluded it from aggressively pursuing the nuclear option. Indeed, for the founder of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and many others within the clerical elite, the indiscriminate nature of such weapons was seen as inconsistent with Islamic canons of war. A more detailed focus on the nuclear infrastructure began during Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency in the early 1990s and was sustained by Muhammad Khatami's reformist government.

Successive U.S. administrations have sought to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions. Over the years, Washington has scored some impressive gains and managed to delay and frustrate Tehran's quest for nuclear technology. The administration of Ronald Reagan succeeded in obtaining Europe's agreement to rigorous export controls with respect to dual-use technologies and in getting Germany to abandon its cooperation with Iran's nascent nuclear program. In a similar vein, by 1996, persistent American pressure managed to get China to cease its nuclear cooperation with Iran. Given Europe's and China's unwillingness to assist in Iran's nuclear research activities, Tehran turned to a new source of aid, Russia.

The Russian Federation soon began to fill the void left by the withdrawal of the other international actors and assisted Iran in building its two nuclear

¹ Ardeshir Zahedi, "Iran's Nuclear Ambitions," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 June 2004.

² Abbas Milani, Michael McFaul, and Larry Diamond, *Beyond Incrementalism: A New Strategy of Dealing with Iran* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 2005), 6.

reactors at Bushehr, which suffered from neglect during the Iran–Iraq war. Over the years, Russia has also provided Iran with fuel fabrication technology, and possibly, even uranium enrichment centrifuge plans. Throughout the 1990s, the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton attempted to deter Russia from this course by means of warnings, selective sanctions, and promises of expanded economic ties. Moscow has occasionally pledged to suspend its cooperation with Iran, only to quickly resume its activities. Indeed, all the agreements and threats have failed to alter Russian designs, and the lure of profits and strategic cooperation between Tehran and Moscow has led to sustained scientific ties between the two powers.

Throughout the 1990s, despite energetic American diplomacy, the international community appeared complacent regarding Iran's nuclear program. The successful efforts by the Clinton administration to prevent substantial international cooperation with Iran's nascent nuclear industry, coupled with Iranian corruption and mismanagement, led to perceptions that the program had stalled. Issues such as terrorism, Iran's opposition to the peace process, and its quest for missile technology and chemical weapons tended to overshadow the nuclear problem. The international community's sporadic expressions of concern did not necessarily trigger diplomatic sanctions or multilateral pressure.

All this changed in August 2002, as a series of revelations by an Iranian opposition group forced the Washington establishment to revise its previous intelligence assessments. It suddenly appeared that Iran had not only constructed a sophisticated uranium enrichment capability but was also busy developing a plutonium route to nuclear power. Even more ominous was an indication that Tehran's program was reaching the point of self-sufficiency. Although at various stages, Iran's nuclear industry has benefited from external assistance, particularly from Russia, and even more ominously, from the Abdul Qadeer Khan network in Pakistan, the sophisticated nature of these facilities revealed that Iran might have reached the point of self-reliance, at which traditional counterproliferation measures, such as more export controls and curtailment of external assistance, could not measurably slow down its nuclear timeline. Former President Rafsanjani has confirmed, "That we are on the verge of nuclear breakout is true."³ Ali Akbar Salehi, the former Iranian representative to the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), similarly stressed, "We have found the way and we do not have any scientific problems."⁴

Despite such revelations, it is still difficult to predict with any degree of accuracy when Iran will be in a position to construct a deliverable nuclear device. Once Iran completes the necessary infrastructure, from mining to enriching uranium at the suitable weapons-grade level, and masters the engineering skill required to assemble a bomb, it could cross the threshold in a

³ Interview with Hashemi Rafsanjani, Islamic Republic News Agency, hereafter IRNA, 25 May 2004.

⁴ Agence France-Presse, 25 May 2004.

short period of time. All this would depend on the scope and scale of the program and the level of national resources committed to this task. Iran today does have an accelerated program, but not a crash program similar to Pakistan's in the early 1970s, when the entirety of national energies was mobilized behind the task of constructing a nuclear device. In this context, Iran's persistent determination to complete the fuel cycle—which it has a right to do under the NPT—is ominous, because doing so would bring the country close to a weapons capability.

Having stipulated the importance of paying attention to Iran's scientific progress, it is necessary to examine the critical international and domestic factors that condition Tehran's nuclear calculations. Historically, a state embarks on the costly path of nuclear empowerment in order to achieve certain strategic objectives. Deterrence of adversaries, national prestige, and the desire to project power in an uncertain regional environment have offered a number of states important incentives to pursue such weapons. As a nuclear industry matures, it inevitably generates domestic constituencies devoted to the perpetuation of the nuclear path, even if the initial strategic concerns that launched the program may no longer be relevant. Iran does indeed fit this pattern, as both its precarious geopolitical position and its internal development have created a state committed to its nuclear path. Iran does live in a dangerous and unpredictable neighborhood, leading its ruling elite during two very different regimes—a pro-Western monarchy and a militant theocracy—to devote considerable resources to the nuclear program. Through an assessment of external and internal factors, one can better appreciate the magnitude of the Iranian challenge.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

As Iran's nuclear program crosses successive thresholds, a wide variety of explanations have been proffered for its underlying designs. Given the regime's strident anti-Israeli rhetoric, it is often assumed that Tehran's animosity toward the Jewish state drives its nuclear determinations. At the same time, given the fact that Iran is adjacent to two states that have suffered coercive regime change at the hands of the United States, it is not unreasonable to claim that a desire to deter America guides the clerical elite. As with most states, a combination of fears and opportunities, concerns and ambitions are propelling the recalcitrant theocracy toward the option of assembling the bomb.

The question of Israel needs to be assessed carefully, for in this case, rhetorical fulminations conceal more than they reveal. To be sure, Iran views Israel as an illegitimate state, and its continued power as a product of a pernicious conspiracy. In its opposition to Israel, the Islamic Republic has violated all prevailing international norms; it frequently denies that the Holocaust occurred, calls for the elimination of a member state of the United Nations, and actively supports terrorist organizations plotting against Jerusalem. However, during the three decades since launching its nuclear program, Iran has pre-

ferred to express its disdain for Israel through proxies and has striven hard to wage its indirect war within distinct limits or “red lines.” Indeed, one of the characteristics of this most peculiar of conflicts is that both parties have sought to avoid direct military confrontation. Such a posture meets Iran’s ideological and strategic interests, as it can claim the leadership of militant Islamist opposition to the “Zionist entity,” while at the same time avoiding engagement with one of the most powerful military forces in the world. In this context, it is hard to suggest that Iran wants the bomb either because it fears Israel or, alternatively, as a weapon for the eradication of the Jewish state.

While Israel may be peripheral to Iran’s nuclear calculations, the American shadow looms large. With the background of the perennial tension between the two states, the George W. Bush administration’s muscular unilateralism and calls for regime change as a means of fostering stability have unsettled Iran’s reactionary rulers. For many within Iran’s corridors of power, the only way in which the long-term American challenge can be negated is through the possession of the “strategic weapon.” The conservative newspaper *Jumhuri-ye Islami* captured Tehran’s dilemma by noting, “In the contemporary world, it is obvious that having access to advanced weapons shall cause deterrence and therefore security, and will neutralize the evil wishes of great powers to attack other nations and countries.”⁵ In a similar vein, the leading reformist newspaper, *Aftab-e Yazd*, stressed that given the regional exigencies, “In the future Iran might be thinking about the military aspects of nuclear energy.”⁶ Given the asymmetry of power between the two states, a presumed nuclear capability seems to be the only viable deterrent posture against an adversary that has never accepted the legitimacy of the Iranian revolution and has long sought to isolate and contain the Islamic Republic.

America is not the only potential problem that Iran faces; to its east lies a nuclear-armed Pakistan, with its own strain of anti-Shiism. Although General Pervez Musharraf is routinely celebrated in Washington as a reliable ally in the war against terrorism, Pakistan’s past is checkered and problematic. Pakistan perceived the demise of the Soviet Union as a unique opportunity to exert its influence in Central Asia and to capture the emerging markets in that critical area. Afghanistan was viewed as an indispensable bridge to Central Asia, and Pakistani intelligence services did much to ensure the triumph of the radical Taliban movement in the ensuing Afghan civil war. The rise of the Taliban and the eventual establishment of al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan had much to do with Pakistan’s cynical strategy. Throughout the 1990s, Pakistani machinations caused considerable tensions with Iran, which was uneasy about the emergence of a radical Sunni regime on its northeastern border.

Although Pakistan’s relations with Iran have improved since September 11, with Pakistan’s final abandonment of the Taliban, the specter of instability in

⁵ “Anti-Arrogance Campaign Becomes Necessary,” *Jumhuri-ye Islami*, 3 November 2004.

⁶ “Necessity and Choice,” *Aftab-e Yazd*, 21 June 2004.

Islamabad haunts Iran's leadership. The possibility of the collapse of the current military government and its displacement by a radical Sunni regime with access to nuclear weapons is something Iran feels it must guard against. Pakistan's nuclear test in 1998 caused considerable anxiety in Tehran, with Rafsanjani stressing, "This is a major step toward proliferation of nuclear weapons. This is a truly dangerous matter and we must be concerned."⁷ Former Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi also mused, "This was one genie that was much better to have stayed confined in the bottle."⁸ Along with America, Pakistan is a potential threat that Iran must take into consideration as it plots its defense strategy.

Tense relations with the United States, a complex regional environment, and an unstable eastern frontier may lead one to perceive that Iran's motivations are purely defensive. However, the Middle East has undergone dramatic changes since the American invasion of Iraq, and the guardians of theocracy are sensing a unique opportunity to establish their own co-prosperity sphere in the Persian Gulf. The breakdown of Iraq removes a historic barrier to projection of Iranian power at a time when the United States is eager to leave its Arab burden behind. A presumed nuclear capability will probably convince the small Gulf sheikdoms that Iran is immune from American retribution and that they therefore have to come to terms with the clerical state. In essence, an Iranian nuclear capability will alter the psychological environment, making the appeasement of Iran a compelling strategic move by the weak Gulf states deprived of protection from their humbled imperial benefactor. In this context, the often-contemplated notion of offering Iran security guarantees in return for its disarmament has limited utility, since Tehran's drive for the bomb transcends mere deterrence and is rooted in opportunism and a quest for hegemony.

As a nation embarks on a nuclear program, its motivations cannot be limited to its geopolitical ambitions or security anxieties. Domestic politics, the perceptions of the political class, and the emergence of important constituents within the regime have an immeasurable impact on the direction of a nation's military planning. Today in Iran, the perennial factionalism of the past few years is uneasily yielding to the consolidation of power by hard-line politicians whose ideology was molded by a profound distrust of the international community and its principal guardian, the United States. In addition to the external events, one must consider Iran's changing politics before considering an approach to the Islamic Republic's nuclear challenge.

DOMESTIC DEBATES

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a regime continuously divided against itself. Even in the era of conservative political hegemony, there are factions, on issues

⁷ "Friday Prayer Speech by Hashemi Rafsanjani," IRNA, 17 May 1998.

⁸ *The New York Times*, 7 June 1998.

of economic reform, regional priorities, and even relations with America, and conservatives frequently find themselves at odds with one another. However, today, a unique consensus has evolved within the regime on the nuclear issue. Iran's cantankerous conservatives seem united on the notion that the Islamic Republic should have an advanced nuclear infrastructure that will offer it an opportunity to cross the nuclear threshold at some point. Whether Iran will take that step or will remain satisfied with a presumed capability just short of an actual breakout, as India did prior to 1997, will depend on a range of domestic and international developments.

It must be emphasized from the outset that for all the factions involved in this debate, the core issue is how to safeguard Iran's national interests. The Islamic Republic is not an irrational rogue state seeking such weaponry as an instrument of an aggressive, revolutionary foreign policy. This is not an "Islamic bomb" to be handed over to terrorist organizations or exploded in the streets of New York or Washington. The fact is that Iran has long possessed chemical weapons, and has yet to transfer such arms to its terrorist allies. Iran's cautious leaders are most interested in remaining in power, and fully appreciate that transferring nuclear weapons to terrorists could lead to the type of retaliation from the United States or Israel that would eliminate their regime altogether. For Iran this is a weapon of deterrence and power projection.

The primary supporters of the nuclear program are now officials in command of key institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards and the Guardian Council. A fundamental tenet of the hard-liners' ideology is the notion that the Islamic Republic is in constant danger from predatory external forces, necessitating military self-reliance. This perception was initially molded by a revolution that sought not just to defy international norms but also to refashion them. The passage of time and the failure of that mission have not necessarily diminished the hard-liners' suspicions of the international order and its primary guardian, the United States. *Jumhuri-ye Islami*, the mouthpiece of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, sounded this theme by stressing that "the core problem is the fact that our officials' outlook on the nuclear dossier of Iran is faulty and they are on the wrong track. It seems they have failed to appreciate that America is after our destruction and the nuclear issue is merely an excuse for them."⁹

In a similar vein, *Resalat*, another influential conservative paper, sounded the themes of deterrence and national interest by claiming, "In the present situation of international order whose main characteristics are injustice and the weakening of the rights of others, the Islamic Republic has no alternative but intelligent resistance while paying the least cost."¹⁰ Given its paranoia and suspicions, the Iranian right does not necessarily object to international isolation and confrontation with the West. Indeed, for many within this camp,

⁹ "Resisting the US on the Nuclear Issue Can Save Islam," *Jumhuri-ye Islami*, 3 April 2005.

¹⁰ "Nuclear Decisions Must Be Made Based on National Interest," *Resalat*, 30 May 2004.

such a conflict would be an effective means of rekindling popular support for the revolution's fading élan.

Iran's nuclear calculations have been further hardened by the rise of war veterans such as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to positions of power. Although the Iran–Iraq war ended nearly twenty years ago, for many within the Islamic Republic, it was a defining experience that altered their strategic assumptions. Even a cursory examination of Ahmadinejad's speeches reveals that for him, the war is far from a faded memory. In his defiant speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2005, Iran's President pointedly admonished the assembled dignitaries for their failings:

For eight years, Saddam's regime imposed a massive war of aggression against my people. It employed the most heinous weapons of mass destruction including chemical weapons against Iranians and Iraqis alike. Who, in fact, armed Saddam with those weapons? What was the reaction of those who claim to fight against WMDs regarding the use of chemical weapons then?¹¹

The international indifference to Saddam's war crimes and Tehran's lack of an effective response has led Iran's war veteran President to perceive that the security of his country cannot be predicated on global opinion and treaties.

The impact of the Iran–Iraq war on Tehran's nuclear calculations cannot be underestimated. Iraq's employment of chemical weapons against Iranian civilians and combatants has permanently scarred Iran's national psyche. Whatever their tactical military utility, in Saddam's hands, chemical weapons were tools of terror, as he hoped that through their indiscriminate use he could frighten and demoralize the Iranian populace. To a large extent, this strategy succeeded; Iraqi attacks did much to undermine national support for continuation of the war.

Beyond the human toll, the war also changed Iran's strategic doctrine. During the war, Iran persisted with the notion that technological superiority cannot overcome revolutionary zeal and a willingness to offer martyrs. To compensate for its lack of weaponry, Iran launched human-wave assaults and used its young population as a tool of an offensive military strategy. The devastation of the war and the loss of an appetite for "martyrdom" among Iran's youth has invalidated that approach. As Rafsanjani acknowledged, "With regards to chemical, bacteriological and radiological weapons, it was made clear during the war that these weapons are very decisive. We should fully equip ourselves in both offensive and defensive use of these weapons."¹² Moreover, the indifference of the international community to Saddam's crimes also left its mark, leading Iran to reject the notion that international agreements can ensure its security. As Mohsen Rezai, the former commander of the Revolu-

¹¹ "President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's UN Address," IRNA, 17 September 2005.

¹² Cited in Wyn Bowen and Joanna Kidd, "The Iranian Nuclear Challenge," *International Affairs* 80 (March 2004): 257–276.

tionary Guards, said in 2004, "We cannot, generally speaking, argue that our country will derive any benefit from accepting international treaties."¹³ Deterrence could no longer be predicated on revolutionary commitment and international opinion; Iran required a more credible military response.

The legacy of the war only reinforces a nationalistic narrative that sees America's demands for Iran to relinquish its fuel cycle rights under the NPT as inherently unjust. As a country that has historically been the object of foreign intervention and the imposition of various capitulation treaties, Iran is inordinately protective of its national prerogatives and sovereign rights. The rulers of Iran perceive that they are being challenged not because of their provocations and previous treaty violations, but because of superpower bullying. In a peculiar manner, the nuclear program and Iran's national identity have become fused in the imagination of the hard-liners. To stand against America on this issue is to validate one's revolutionary ardor and sense of nationalism. Ali Hussein Tash, the Deputy Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, stressed this point, saying, "A nation that does not engage in risks and difficult challenges, and a nation which does not stand up for itself can never be a proud nation."¹⁴ Thus, the notion of compromise and acquiescence has limited appeal to Iran's aggrieved nationalists.

Despite their bitterness and cynicism, the theocratic hard-liners are eternal optimists when it comes to their assessment of how the international community would respond to Iran's nuclear breakout. Many influential conservative voices insist that Iran's breakout would follow the model of India and Pakistan, with the initial international outcry soon followed by an acceptance of Iran's new status. Thus, Tehran would regain its commercial contracts and keep its nuclear weapons. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati noted this theme when stressing, "Whenever we stand firm and defend our righteous stands resolutely, they are forced to retreat and have no alternatives."¹⁵ The right thus rejects the notion that Iran's mischievous past and its tense relations with the United States would militate against the international community's acceptance of Iran's nuclear status.

However, should their anticipations prove misguided and Iran become the subject of sanctions, it is a price that the hard-liners are willing to pay for an important national prerogative. Ahmadinejad has pointedly noted that even if sanctions were to be imposed, "the Iranian nation would still have its rights."¹⁶ In a similar vein, Ayatollah Jannati has noted, "We do not welcome sanctions, but if we are threatened by sanctions, we will not give in."¹⁷ The notion of the need to sacrifice and struggle on behalf of the revolution and to resist

¹³ IRNA 13 September 2004.

¹⁴ *Farhang-e Ashti*, 28 February 2006.

¹⁵ IRNA, 22 September 2004.

¹⁶ "Time to Base Diplomatic Negotiations on Basij Values," *Sharq*, 25 October 2005.

¹⁷ *Aftab-e Yazd*, 16 October 2005.

imperious international demands is an essential tenet of the hard-liners' ideological perspective.

For the foreseeable future, the United States will confront an Iranian state whose strategic vulnerabilities, regional ambitions, and internal political alignments will push it in the direction of nuclear capability. However, this is not the first time that Washington has confronted an adversary determined to acquire the bomb. Are there lessons in the history of counterproliferation that could help in defusing the Iranian challenge? Is there anything that the United States and its allies could still do to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold and introducing such dangerous weapons into such a volatile region?

AMERICAN STRATEGIC ALTERNATIVES

The debate within the United States over how to manage Iran's regional and nuclear ambitions has frequently been characterized by the presentation of false choices. Foreign policy hawks in the United States, including key members of the present Bush administration, argue for coercion and "regime change" rather than diplomacy in relation to Iran. Foreign policy doves, on the other hand, argue for the use of inducements and engagement. Neither approach is likely to prove realistic by itself. Yet the United States and its allies have broad historical experience of managing similar challenges from hostile or threatening states—both successfully and unsuccessfully. A brief discussion of the fundamental strategic alternatives, along with their historical record in other cases, will help to enlighten the current debate over U.S. policy toward Iran. As in past and comparable circumstances, the United States has four basic strategic options in relation to Iran: containment, rollback, non-entanglement, and engagement.

Containment involves the creation of political, military, and economic counterweights around a potentially hostile or aggressive state. It is a form of balance-of-power diplomacy, most closely associated with the Cold War, but one with considerable variety in its operationalization. During the early phase of the Cold War, America's containment policy eschewed negotiations with the Soviet Union in the hope that the USSR would collapse.¹⁸ The later Cold War version, on the other hand, typically combined containment and diplomacy. Indeed, in traditional balance-of-power diplomacy, there is nothing to prevent adversaries from negotiating even as they attempt to outmaneuver one another. So while containment certainly requires both patience and credible military commitments, it is not necessarily incompatible with diplomacy or engagement. In the case of Saddam's Iraq, successive U.S. administrations from 1991 to 2001 rightly rejected negotiations with Saddam but maintained a strategy of containment against Iraq involving regional military bases and alliances, periodic air strikes, economic sanctions, and (until 1998) UN inspections. That

¹⁸ George Kennan to Secretary of State James Byrnes, 22 February 1946, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1946, vol. 6 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 696–709.

strategy of containment was criticized for having failed, but the alternatives were equally unpalatable. If the objective was the deterrence of Saddam, weakening his military arsenal and ensuring that he would not invade his neighbors, then containment was in fact quite effective.¹⁹ As in all cases, and so with Iran, the costs or imperfections of containment can only be measured in comparison to the potential costs of alternative strategies.

Rollback is a more aggressive option than containment, and the one singled out by the Bush administration for fresh use since the terrorist attacks of 2001. At the most basic level, rollback involves the use of military force to displace a hostile regime. There are also less-extreme variants of this strategy. Rollback can encompass, for example, the use of diplomatic or economic sanctions in the hope that such pressures will provoke the demise of the targeted regime. There are certainly historic cases where nothing short of direct rollback would have sufficed to remove a deadly international danger, the obvious case being Hitler's Germany. However, not every unsavory regime is Nazi Germany. Many of America's enemies are not powerful states determined to employ military force to achieve their objectives. Indeed, the most important contribution that George Kennan made to the strategy of containment was his assessment that while the Soviet leadership was implacably hostile to the West, it would refrain from war.²⁰ This critical factor made possible the containment of the USSR. When rollback is successful, it has the advantage of removing a given threat altogether. The strategy of rollback has always proven tempting to the American public, as it pledges quick and decisive results. But this very feature comes with a downside: just as direct military rollback is the most assertive of the four basic strategic alternatives under discussion, so it is also potentially the most costly and risk prone. It is precisely for this reason that the administration of Harry Truman rejected General Douglas MacArthur's argument for rollback against China in 1951. The failure of rollback, however, can be devastating. The botched invasions of North Korea in 1950–1951 and Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 stand as stark reminders of the high price of unsuccessful rollback operations. In Iraq, the Bush administration succeeded in overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein but has thus far failed to put any stable government in its place. The cost of Saddam's rollback to American interests, in terms of military, political, and international credibility, has been considerable. Direct military rollback is therefore a very shaky premise upon which to base American policy. A declared policy of rollback inevitably faces the question of whether we should act upon the stated goal directly and militarily. Even a verbal commitment to regime change carries risks of its own, since the stated goal of overthrowing a given political system obviously complicates diplomacy and may invite preventive attack.

¹⁹ Daniel Byman, "After the Storm: U.S. Policy Toward Iraq Since 1991," *Political Science Quarterly* 114 (Winter 2001–2002): 493–516.

²⁰ Kennan to Byrnes, 706–708.

Non-entanglement is another basic strategic alternative, and one that probably receives insufficient consideration. Its most important element is a refusal to embark on any initiatives, whether in terms of offering inducements or threats, in relation to the adversarial state. In cases where American interests are limited, and where the costs of intervention outweigh the benefits, non-entanglement can be a perfectly good option. Nonetheless, when America is compelled to intervene to protect its essential interests—as for example in Kuwait in 1991—then the previous inactivity can act as a source of conflict. When the United States tries to pursue a strategy of non-entanglement, it often ends up having to intervene later, at greater cost and embarrassment. In the meantime, moreover, hostile states are allowed free rein to pursue their revisionist ambitions. In the long term, therefore, non-entanglement can also be a very risky strategy.

Engagement is the final alternative, one that appears to have a wide variety of distinct meanings. There is engagement as *activism*, in reference to a basic stance of political, strategic, or commercial activity worldwide. There is engagement as simple *contact* with an existing adversary, diplomatically or economically. There is engagement as *integration*, in which such diplomatic or economic contact is used as a strategy in itself, in the hopes of creating patterns of cooperation, integration, and interdependence between hostile states.²¹ There is engagement as *détente*, in which adversaries enter into a limited range of cooperative agreements alongside continued rivalry. Finally, there is engagement as *bargaining* or negotiation, in which specific and concrete concessions between adversaries are mutual and reciprocal. Both bargaining and *détente* can be distinguished from an ill-advised strategy of appeasement, in which concessions are made unilaterally in the hope of satiating or altering an adversary's aggressive intentions. Observers often call on the United States to “engage” Iran, without specifying exactly what they have in mind. Yet the concept of engagement includes a range of distinctive strategies that must not be confused with one another. There are historic precedents for such confusion. The collapse of the USSR, for example, is frequently attributed to the subversive influence of increased contact with the West. However, there is good reason to believe that the infusion of Western trade temporarily strengthened the Soviet bloc. In that case, a strategy of intended subversion had the converse effect of empowering an adversary.²² It is important to note, however, that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did not perceive *détente* as a full-blown strategy of integration, but as a way to reduce the risk of nuclear war while maintaining a more inexpensive and discriminate form of containment. Within

²¹ Richard Haass, *The Opportunity: America's Moment to Alter History's Course* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 16–42, 115–135, 171–182.

²² See, for example, in the case of East Germany, Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Random House, 1993), 367–368; and M.E. Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente and Ostpolitik, 1969–1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 169–178.

such a framework, engagement as *détente* can be viewed as having achieved its limited goals.

The concept of engagement through integration in relation to Iran has received growing attention in U.S. foreign policy circles. The weakness of such a strategy, however, is that it badly underestimates the hostility of most factions within the Iranian government toward the United States. It also underestimates the high value that Iran's political leaders in general place upon their nuclear weapons program. The modest existing diplomatic and economic inducements on offer from the EU will not alter Tehran's determination to go nuclear, especially in the absence of credible coercive threats. On the contrary, recent experience suggests that Iranian negotiators will probably try to wring whatever concessions they can from any process of negotiation, without abandoning their nuclear or regional ambitions. The Bush administration obviously caused deep apprehension in Tehran when it declared a policy of regime change, but the problem goes deeper than that, since Iran's nuclear program well pre-dates the current administration.

Simply hoping for Iranian democratization, on the other hand, is not really a coherent strategy. We can certainly root for the eventual victory of dissident democratic reformers within Iran, but there are no indications of their imminent success, to say the least. In practical terms, direct military rollback is not a serious option either. An American invasion and occupation of Iran aimed at dismantling Tehran's nuclear capabilities is simply not going to happen. Even more-limited U.S. air strikes against Iran and its weapons sites would probably fail to destroy Iran's nuclear program, and the political fallout would be immense: a nationalist backlash among the Iranian public, international condemnation of the United States, the strengthening of Iran's hard-liners, the potential disruption of Persian Gulf oil supplies to the industrialized world, and Iranian-sponsored attacks against American troops and interests throughout the region.²³

What then is to be done? The Bush administration has repeatedly declared its support for the overthrow of Iran's theocratic regime. Over the past two years, however, the administration has shown considerable patience in allowing an alternative diplomatic track to move forward. The EU was initially encouraged by Washington to put a number of economic and diplomatic carrots on the table in order to induce Iran to negotiate. Iran's response was so gratuitously uncooperative that the United States was able to win limited economic and weapons-related sanctions against Iran from the UN Security Council in December 2006. These events represent a real diplomatic success for the Bush administration. But the question now is what happens next. The existing limited sanctions will probably have no dramatic effects on Iran's economy, its leadership, or its nuclear weapons program—Moscow has made sure of that. China and Russia are very unlikely to agree to any truly punishing sanctions—

²³ Geoffrey Kemp, "Desperate Times, Half Measures," *The National Interest* 80 (Summer 2005): 53–56.

for example, against Iranian oil and gas. Nor are the French or Germans likely to support UN-approved military action against Iran. The current diplomatic track may, therefore, have run its course, since it is unlikely to bring any major changes in position on either side. It must be stressed that throughout these deliberations, the United States has never made a significant offer to Iran, apart from insisting that it will participate in negotiations should Tehran suspend its enrichment activities.

The United States has never taken the lead on the diplomatic side, allowing the EU to do so instead. Rather, the Bush administration has acted for the most part as if the very idea of direct, bilateral negotiations with Iran would represent a great concession on the part of the United States. Of course, they would be no such thing. Just as negotiation is not a worthy end in itself, neither is the absence of negotiation an end in itself, if such absence hurts American interests—and in this case it has. Indeed, the practical effect of the American attitude has been that Iran has moved closer and closer to having nuclear weapons: call it “malign neglect,” an intransigent form of containment mixed with non-entanglement. The EU, for its part—with the notable exception of Tony Blair’s Britain—has been unwilling to seriously consider the eventual prospect of military action. Fortunately, the Europeans have recently moved in a more hard-line direction against Iran—at least in terms of economic sanctions—than many thought possible only a few months ago. That gives the American position more leverage in relation to Tehran.

A better starting point for U.S. strategy toward Iran would be neither integration, nor rollback, nor malign neglect, but containment, supplemented by direct bargaining over the issue of Iran’s nuclear weapons. Effective containment requires clarity about the consequences of aggression, along with credible military capabilities, commitments, and alliances within the region. Washington still has those regional capabilities and alliances, much weakened, however, by the quagmire in Iraq. Iran can therefore be deterred from direct military aggression, an unlikely event in any case. But it would be in America’s interest to supplement this baseline strategy of containment with direct, comprehensive negotiations over the nuclear issue. While Iran’s conservative and hard-line leaders collectively place a very high value on their nascent nuclear program, they do not necessarily agree among themselves on the exact weight or significance of that program in comparison to other goals. Iran’s economy, for example, while benefiting from oil revenues, is in serious need of outside investment and reform. If presented by the West with a clear choice between nuclear weapons and the avoidance of economic damage caused by truly effective sanctions—or a clear choice between nuclear weapons and genuinely significant economic incentives—the more pragmatic members of Iran’s ruling class, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, could very well choose economic benefits over nuclear weapons. Indeed, the very prospect of such a stark choice might allow a faction of pragmatic hard-liners to outmaneuver the more extreme President Ahmadinejad and thus secure their own power domestically.

But they will only do so if the costs and benefits are altered by the United States and its allies so as to give them sufficient incentive to bargain in earnest.²⁴

The general parameters of a serious potential offer or bargain are visible and well understood: Iran would agree to verifiably disclose and freeze its uranium enrichment and plutonium programs, under close inspection by the IAEA. The fact of effective nuclear disarmament would be more important than the formal renunciation of Iran's "rights" to nuclear power. Iran would also abandon support for terrorist activities as part of this agreement. In turn, the United States and its allies would agree to lift long-standing sanctions, unfreeze Iranian assets, encourage foreign investment, ease Iran's entry into the World Trade Organization, and provide supervised technical assistance with the peaceful use of nuclear energy, if necessary. Both sides would normalize relations and offer security assurances to one another. The consequence could very well be a kind of *détente* between Iran and the United States, albeit a strictly limited one. It is entirely possible, even probable, that Iran would reject such an offer, and refuse to abandon its nascent nuclear weapons program regardless. But the effort is necessary. If diplomacy breaks down entirely, then the United States will be in a better position to ratchet up the pressure on Tehran with new international support. Such support will not be available unless the United States makes a genuine, comprehensive, and direct effort at a negotiated solution—an effort that still has not been made.

Clearly, the exact elements of any comprehensive nuclear settlement with Iran are absolutely vital; a number of rules should guide this initiative. First, negotiations should not be based upon the assumption that diplomatic or economic contact by itself will transform Iran's theocratic regime into a democracy. Such an assumption could tempt the United States into excessive compromise with an essentially adversarial state. The only acceptable rationale for a diplomatic initiative is to terminate Iran's nuclear program at an acceptable price. Second, to increase its diplomatic leverage, the United States will have to use not only carrots but sticks in order to persuade Iran to come to a negotiated settlement. The latter could include, for example, threats of new, intensified economic sanctions, or even threats of military action. Third, the United States should conduct its bargaining strategy in tandem with its European allies as well as Russia. It must be Tehran rather than Washington that is outnumbered internationally. Finally, we cannot expect that a nuclear agreement with Iran will automatically terminate the long-standing regional rivalry between Iran and the United States. Iran's theocratic regime will very likely be continuously hostile toward the United States in the medium term, regardless of any diplomatic arrangement.

The idea that Iran can be appeased or its ambitions sated through positive, unilateral inducements alone is an improbable one. In fact, a strategy of pure

²⁴ Kenneth Pollack, "Iran: Three Alternative Futures," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10 (June 2006): 73–80.

accommodation would be positively dangerous, creating a mistaken image of unending passivity on the part of the United States and its allies. The threatened “sticks” of sanctions, compellence, and containment must therefore be a major part of U.S. policy toward Iran. Nonetheless, certain forms of containment are too unsophisticated to serve the American interest, since containment is frequently most effective when complemented by focused inducements and measured diplomacy. Positive economic incentives and diplomatic recognition are policy instruments, or “carrots,” that the United States holds along with military power and economic sanctions. No such policy instrument can be usefully dismissed in the abstract; to do so is to unilaterally diminish our leverage over Iran. The critical thing is to view any positive economic and political inducements as of a piece with a comprehensive strategy in which the promise of rewards is linked to the threat of punishments, as well as to verifiable concessions. Thus far, the sticks and carrots employed by the United States have simply not provided sufficient leverage against Iran. That combination of sticks and carrots must be much more hefty and considerable than at present to have any real impact on Tehran’s own calculus of the costs and benefits of its nuclear program.

Any proposal for diplomatic negotiations must think ahead to their possible failure. If Washington enters into direct talks with Tehran, and those talks collapse, then the United States will be faced with the unpalatable alternatives of either: launching air strikes against Iranian weapons sites, probably without much international support; giving tacit approval to an Israeli air strike with the same purpose; accepting Iran as a nuclear weapons power, in fact, if not in form; or containing Iran in a more aggressive fashion. The first alternative is extremely unappealing, for reasons discussed before, but it would be even less popular without prior diplomatic efforts. The second option is not much better, but the United States may be unable or unwilling to stop it. The third alternative is inadequate, especially in relation to Iran’s current and particularly repugnant president. The United States must therefore consider ways in which it and its allies can pressure Iran much more aggressively—economically, militarily, and diplomatically—should all nuclear talks break down. The very prospect of such ratcheted pressure, if sufficiently serious, might help tilt the Iranian government toward a negotiated settlement beforehand. Tehran’s hardliners cannot count on America’s infinite patience in this matter, no matter how confident they may be right now. Again, this threat will be more convincing if the United States can be shown to have gone the extra mile in reaching for a diplomatic solution. One outcome that is entirely possible, however, is a prolonged standoff, during which Iran continues to develop its nuclear weapons capabilities. Such a standoff will require steady nerves in U.S. foreign policy circles, along with the ability to distinguish reality from rhetoric. Under such unwanted circumstances, it will be useful to recall that while we would far prefer a nuclear-free Iran, Tehran—like previous authoritarian but survival-oriented governments—is extremely unlikely to use such awesome weapons

in a suicidal manner. Iran's leaders undoubtedly know that any use of nuclear weapons against the United States or its allies, either directly, or indirectly through transfer to terrorist groups, would bring about their own utter destruction. An Iranian nuclear deterrent would therefore probably function much as Soviet nuclear weapons did during the Cold War, amplifying Iran's diplomatic leverage within the region and complicating but not erasing the effects of American military commitments. This would be a severe setback for the United States, but not a fatal one. The American focus would then be upon minimizing the effects of proliferation within the Middle East, for example, through regional arms control arrangements and confidence-building measures. Israel, however, would probably act militarily prior to this eventuality; we can hardly expect the Israelis to accept with equanimity the prospect of a nuclear-armed regime that hosts international conferences in order to deny that the Holocaust occurred.

Simply walking through the probable outcomes of the current crisis is to realize the imperative of serious and comprehensive negotiations between Tehran and Washington right now. Advocates of both engagement and rollback often suggest that theirs is the best route to political change within Iran, but regime change is a hope rather than a strategy. The Iranian theocracy has already outlasted several U.S. presidents; it looks unlikely to collapse any time soon.²⁵ A well-intentioned but misguided strategy of integration through engagement could very well strengthen the Iranian government without altering its foreign policy intentions or nuclear capabilities. On the other hand, a strategy of direct rollback risks American diplomatic isolation or possibly even a war that cannot redound to U.S. interests. Since the United States is not about to invade and occupy Iran, an unwillingness to engage in diplomacy with its government amounts to tacit consent as Tehran develops the bomb. The United States must therefore avoid the twin risks of rollback and appeasement, and instead pursue containment supplemented by some direct, hard bargaining with Iran. Such a strategy represents the only chance that the United States still has to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

²⁵ Elliot Hen-Tov, "Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism," *The Washington Quarterly* 30 (Winter 2006–2007): 163–179.