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## BRIEFING PAPER

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# THE US AND IRAN ON A CONFRONTATIONAL COURSE

By Steve Wright, Heidi Huuhtanen  
& Tapani Vaahtoranta





The US and Iran are on a confrontational course. Iran challenges the US hegemony in the region and is striving for regional dominance. The US does not accept the current Iranian regime, foreign policy or drive towards nuclear capability. The strategies of both have led to a classic game of chicken. Neither is ready to give concessions to avoid confrontation.

## The US view

The Bush administration has two key strategic objectives stemming from its view of the Iranian government. In the immediate term, the United States wishes a complete and comprehensive ending of Iran's nuclear power programme. In the long term, the aim is a moderation of Iranian foreign policy and a political transformation of the Iranian government.

The issue facing US policy on Iran's nuclear power programme is that it is pressing for contradictory goals: arguing Iran must not develop nuclear weapons because it would be contrary to international law, but rejecting Iran's legal right to have a domestic nuclear power programme and the ability to enrich uranium. Although Iran has a legal right under international law to have a domestic nuclear power programme, the Bush administration believes this is part of a secret programme to produce nuclear weapons. Indeed, this is a view, which is virtually unanimously held by members of Congress.

When one looks at Congressional legislation, it is important to recognise that the Senate and the House both passed legislation in 2004 that completely rejects Iran's legitimate right to have a nuclear power programme. This is very significant. As this is both the position of the Bush administration and Congress, there is little or no hope for compromise on this issue, especially given that campaigning for mid-term Congressional elections will soon be underway.

In terms of diplomacy, the central issue is that the Bush administration has reduced its objectives to a zero sum game. Whilst the Europeans are in favour of a compromise whereby Iran has a domestic nuclear power programme but implements additional safeguards which include a virtual abandonment of its legal right for a self sufficient uranium enrichment

capability; the United States simply does not accept Iran's right to have any domestic nuclear power programme at all.

## Iranian view

The primary objective of the Iranian regime is survival and since its inclusion in the axis of evil coupled with the US having invaded two neighbouring countries, many within the regime fear Washington's next target is Iran. An Iranian nuclear weapon capability would make strategic sense for Iran as it would arguably act as a credible deterrence against a US military attack.

The US hegemonic position in the Middle East, however, leaves very little scope for challenging US regional goals. With these realities in mind, a moderation of Iranian foreign policy would be a necessity in the long run. The nuclear capability would alter this regional dynamic and turn Iran away from isolation and towards being an acknowledged regional power.

The Iranians appear set on continuing their current nuclear programme that will provide them with a complete fuel cycle capability and the possibility of developing weapons if so decided. According to Professor Salehi, the former head of

Iran's delegation to the International Atomic Agency (IAEA), it appears that Iran is unlikely to agree to a long-term moratorium over its legal right to enrich uranium, and simply will not suspend the commissioning of the Bushehr nuclear power plant. Indeed, this view was echoed by Mr Boroujerdi, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee of Foreign Relations, who maintained that a nuclear power programme and enrichment capability is Iran's legal right and will not be suspended because of US pressure tactics.



## Diplomatic and military options

Currently diplomatic options are on the table, but the incompatibility of the American and Iranian policies is likely to lead to a military confrontation unless one side alters its policy objectives.

In the short term the US would be satisfied with complete ending of the Iranian power programme. The problem is that the compromise advocated by the Europeans may not go far enough for the Bush administration. It wants a complete disassembling of Iran's nuclear programme along similar lines to what happened in Libya. There is, however, scope for an EU solution. The Bush administration is less likely to feel the need to resort to force if the EU-3 can achieve a complete suspension of Iran's nuclear power programme. This would include both the issue of uranium enrichment and the commissioning of the Bushehr power plant. By focusing only on a moratorium on Iran's uranium enrichment project, the EU misses the broader picture where the United States simply will not allow the commissioning of the Bushehr power plant.

The problem with these polarised views is that without a moratorium on uranium enrichment and the commissioning of the Bushehr power plant, the Bush administration may view the pre-emptive use of force as a necessity in order to stop Iran from even having the potential to build a nuclear weapon in the future. Nevertheless, such a military option would probably also include the targeting of Iran's governmental and military apparatus in order to weaken the regime overall, and limit its retaliatory capability, in order to serve the long-term strategic objectives of the United States towards Iran.

***Steve Wright, Heidi Huuhtanen & Tapani Vaahtoranta***

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