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Engaging Iran? Contrasting Views on U.S. Diplomacy

Featuring [Patrick Clawson](#) and Ray Takeyh
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On June 13, 2007, Ray Takeyh and Patrick Clawson addressed The Washington Institute's Policy Forum seminar series. Dr. Takeyh is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Dr. Clawson is deputy director for research at the Institute and coauthor of [Forcing Hard Choices on Tehran: Raising the Costs of Iran's Nuclear Program](#). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

RAY TAKEYH

Despite the political rivalries and factionalism that characterize the Islamic Republic of Iran, the nation's governing elite have arrived at a certain consensus on core security issues. In particular, they all agree that Iran should be a leading power in the region. Regarding the nuclear program -- the most divisive security issue -- the idea is to embark on a course that will give Iran a sophisticated nuclear infrastructure, which could in turn allow for a potential weapons option if and when desired.

In pursuit of such a program, Iran must be prepared to suffer negative consequences, including economic ramifications. To what extent the regime is willing to tolerate such pain remains to be seen. But Iran's public position on the nuclear issue has been systematic, disciplined, and unaltered since 2005. There has been no suspension or offering of confidence-building measures to alleviate Western concerns about the program's nature and scope. The American "red lines" have changed many times and, in the end, evaporated altogether except for one remaining precondition: suspension of the program before comprehensive negotiations can begin. And that precondition might soon disappear as well.

At the same time, Tehran has revised its position on whether to diplomatically engage the United States on a comprehensive range of issues. In August 2006, the official Iranian response to a belated offer of negotiations from the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council -- the United States, Russia, China, France, and Britain -- plus Germany) indicated that the regime was prepared for comprehensive negotiations on economic, energy, and security issues -- but without preconditions. Now the United States is faced with a situation in which Iranian leaders have reached some internal agreements that are beneficial to the United States, and some that are not.

Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, the most systematic U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic has been the idea of containment -- the marshalling of economic, political, and diplomatic resources to pressure Tehran into changing its core foreign policy objectives. But the ingredients needed to make this approach succeed are absent. The Bush administration is now following a two-track policy that couples coercive measures with offers of negotiations. The coercive measures have been explicit -- U.S. military buildup in the Persian Gulf, informal financial sanctions, UN Security Council resolutions, detention of Iranian personnel in Iraq, and so forth. In contrast, Washington's efforts toward initiating comprehensive negotiations have been amorphous.

This two-track policy is not working because it is insensitive to Iran's domestic political landscape, which is marked by disagreements within the governing class that are leading to both paralysis and escalation. Thirty years ago, Henry Kissinger stated that containment works when you create a set of conditions whereby the

targeted state -- in his case, the Soviet Union -- wants to be contained. Today, the United States needs to create a set of conditions that make Iran want to be contained. If the doctrine of containment is to succeed, its strictures must be embraced voluntarily.

There is no guarantee that normalization of relations would succeed as a means of containment, but it is a policy that has not yet been tried. There would be several obstacles to confront if Washington were to pursue such a policy, however. First, what degree of Iranian nuclear capability and what set of verification procedures is the United States prepared to accept? Second, can the Iranian influence in Iraq be channeled into a more constructive (or, at least, a less pernicious) role? Third, regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, if the relationship between Iran and Hizballah does not change, then the normalization process will not work. Finally, regarding human rights issues, Iran will have to adhere to some universal standard. No matter what the international community offers, Iran will remain a problem in need of significant management for the foreseeable future.

PATRICK CLAWSON

The nuclear problem is the core issue in U.S.-Iranian relations. Because it is a global issue involving Iran's commitment to international treaties -- especially the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty -- it is not a matter to be dealt with on a bilateral basis between Washington and Tehran. If it is reduced to a U.S.-Iranian issue, many governments will be sympathetic to the Iranian position and suspicious of America's intentions.

Accordingly, it is to Washington's advantage that Europe continue to show leadership on important Iran-related security matters. For nearly four years, the transatlantic alliance on the Iranian nuclear issue has involved European leadership with the United States in a supporting role. France, Germany, and Britain have been very firm in their stance against Iran's enrichment plans, but Iran has not caved in. If the United States now decides to take over the negotiations and make a deal with Tehran, the Europeans will feel undercut. Hence, it is important for U.S. interests -- and most certainly for Europe and the rest of the world -- that the Iranian nuclear issue remain a multilateral one.

Clearly, the nuclear issue is not the only question on the U.S.-Iranian agenda -- there are other issues that both sides could discuss. But what are the prospects for such bilateral negotiations? First, have the two sides already tried negotiating on other matters, and if so, what were the results? The United States has made efforts to negotiate with Iran for many years. Press reports often speak of the "first" bilateral meeting between Iran and the United States when in fact there has been a long history of negotiations between the two sides -- though these efforts have achieved only modest progress. Discussing issues of common concern through multinational organizations in which both countries are members has probably worked best, especially on the Iraq issue.

Second, can Washington allay Tehran's main concern: that the U.S. agenda is regime change, and that any negotiations would therefore be a case of "the lamb negotiating with the wolf," as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has put it? Iran feels that even if it can reach an agreement with the United States on one issue, such as Hizballah, the Americans will just raise another issue. It does not matter how many times U.S. ambassador John Bolton states before the UN that Washington's policy is not "regime change" but "change in regime behavior" -- Iran's political elite do not believe this claim because their fears are based on a pattern of U.S. action that will almost certainly continue in the near term.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Hiva Feizi.

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