

US Policies toward Tehran

Redefining Counterproliferation for the Twenty-First Century

Michael Kraig

NUCLEAR COUNTERPROLIFERATION IN the Persian Gulf is failing.¹ In relations with Tehran thus far, US presidents have been unrealistically calling for the eventual strategic goal of zero enrichment capabilities on Iranian soil. In defiance of these demands, Iranian enrichment activities are proceeding slowly but surely toward greater quantitative and qualitative capabilities. Extensive sanctions with genuine negative effects on the Iranian economy and society have formed the crux of US policy for 30 years,² and yet the Islamic regime remains in place, enrichment continues, reprocessing facilities for plutonium are under construction, and Iranian leaders are more intent than ever to resist international pressure on the nuclear issue, even as US preventive military attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities remain firmly on the table.³

Some might argue that there is still hope on the horizon for attaining maximalist US and Western goals vis-à-vis Iran. For instance, in 2010 the United States ultimately succeeded in pushing China, Russia, and India, however reluctantly, to agree to several UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions in a fourth round of major sanctions.⁴ At the same time, the United States yet again ramped up billions in conventional, high-tech arms sales to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.⁵ Meanwhile, separately from these applications of more coercive pressure towards Tehran, recent proposals from Russia, Turkey, and Brazil have in various incarnations allowed for limited Iranian production of, and access to, low-enriched uranium (LEU). Notably, these eclectic and inventive proposals have prescribed the extensive use of a third party's sovereign territory in materials storage, monitoring, and controls.⁶

Dr. Michael Ryan Kraig serves as an assistant professor of national security studies at the Air Command and Staff College. He earned his PhD in political science from the State University of New York at Buffalo with majors in international relations and US foreign policy and has served in several senior capacities with the Stanley Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation devoted to researching and advocating multilateral policy options for mitigating and solving national and global security challenges.

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Certainly, all of these measures have produced some level of short-term or tactical improvement of the situation. However, it is dubious any real *strategic* progress has been made by any of these efforts, whether arms sales, the latest round of Western-favored sanctions, or the nascent diplomatic efforts of various rising powers. Indeed, just prior to the passage of this last round of sanctions—and while a proposal by Turkey and Brazil was being actively considered for inventive LEU storage and control options—the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran had already produced enough LEU to make up to two bombs.⁷ More-recent reports indicate there is now enough Iranian LEU in 3.5-percent, 5-percent, and 20-percent levels to produce 3–4 nuclear bombs via enrichment to weapons-grade, highly enriched uranium (HEU).⁸ Thus, the United States finds itself in a steady march toward a counterproliferation war that nobody wants. This seemingly inexorable slide toward yet another preventive or preemptive use of American military power is in turn due to the fact that US global counterproliferation strategy and its attendant policy instruments are ultimately self-defeating at the global, regional, and national (Iranian) levels of action. First, these policy instruments fail to take into account the views and interests of rising, non-Western powers vis-à-vis Iran. Second, this US-favored approach has not fully recognized the enduring nature of Iranian strategic beliefs and threat assessments at the level of political elites who stand in the way of Iran bowing to current absolute demands but who may offer opportunities for positive leverage in Iranian internal debates under a more flexible approach. Third, the prevailing, long-standing US strategy conflates truly globalized, transnational, fundamentalist Sunni terror threats with the regional Shiite terrorist and political groups supported by revolutionary Iran. Finally, a “nuclear rollback” approach to counterproliferation fails to take into account the complexities of regional proliferation dynamics across the entire developing world. Patterns of opaque proliferation have shown themselves again and again across southern Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia over the past 50 years, with real implications for different strategic choices by external powers in their relations with Gulf States.

This article addresses each of these matters in turn, ending with the broad outlines of a new US and global strategy toward the Gulf and Iran. In particular, it argues that in the interests of regional stability, energy security, and keeping Iranian nuclear infrastructure latent rather than actualized as a weapons arsenal, the United States should refocus and

retool its counterproliferation strategy, which as currently constituted essentially requires nuclear rollback in relations with Tehran. Under this refocusing and retooling, the term *counterproliferation* would no longer mean asking Iran to reverse all of its domestic nuclear infrastructure gains. Rather, it would mean working with a bevy of non-Western rising powers as well as Arab friends in the Gulf to technologically, diplomatically, and militarily manage the reality of an Iran that is a latent nuclear weapons power.

Prevailing US Counterproliferation Agenda

Up to this point, the United States has applied a military- and sanctions-focused counterproliferation approach toward all regions of the world based upon a mix of deterrence, coercive diplomacy, unilateral and multilateral financial and trade instruments, global military superiority, and the preventive or preemptive use of military force. This broad strategy is based on a distinctly American, Wilsonian, liberal internationalist ethos, including heavy rhetorical and moral reliance on the global Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT. Under this treaty, US sanctions and diplomatic threats tend to be “zero sum” in that they are now asking Iranian leaders essentially to submit to Western demands for zero enrichment on Iranian soil or face potentially crippling sanctions against both the Revolutionary Guards and Iran’s imports of processed gasoline for its citizens.⁹

Indeed, these policy instruments started in 1979 with the Iranian revolution. Since then, there have been progressively tougher multilateral sanctions, including strong use of UNSC sanctions resolutions in response to reports from the IAEA of Iranian nontransparency and noncompliance alongside long-standing unilateral US embargos of Iranian goods and services. More provocatively in terms of sensitive relations with its friends and allies, the United States has enacted sanctions legislation that sometimes involves punishment of other international actors (state and nonstate) for banking with, trading with, or investing in Iran. Despite the extremely sensitive and debated nature of the latter efforts, there has been cooperation with allies and partners (especially Europeans) to shut down Iranian international financial networks and trade relations with Iranian banks—mainly via the US Treasury Department—resulting in blocked international trade deals involving Iran’s oil sector and firms tied to the Revolutionary Guards. For instance, several very lucrative and sorely

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needed deals with Western multinational corporations (MNC) meant to modernize Iran's ailing petroleum extraction and processing infrastructure were scuttled due to US governmental pressure and international sanctions.¹⁰ Most controversially, there is growing pressure on Capitol Hill to implement recent legislation—and pass new bills as well—that would dramatically ramp up the punishment of foreign firms, including both Turkish and Chinese firms, for doing business with Iran in sensitive areas of technology.¹¹ These rules-based, coercive policy instruments have been simultaneously shadowed by an illicit, specially targeted, and highly destructive series of effects-based attacks by US-Israeli-produced covert computer viruses. According to widespread reports, a software attack program labeled “Stuxnet” has used the innate ubiquity and vulnerability of modern industrial control systems (command and control modules for nuclear facilities) to temporarily disable almost 1,000 centrifuges.¹²

Finally, as a result of evolutionary developments in reactions to various regional shocks and crises since roughly 1979,¹³ Gulf actors and external powers now exist in an extremely tight symbiotic relationship to provide for mutual regional and global security. The Arab Gulf monarchies, or GCC states, and the United States have particularly strong, dense, and comprehensive security relationships, with some additional assurances from NATO, the European Union, and France and the UK as independent great powers. In summary, US actions can be broadly categorized along the following lines:

- direct sales of weapons systems to individual GCC states;
- direct security training programs, encompassing new weapons systems, development of doctrine, and also counterterrorist training;
- intelligence sharing, including on both Iran and transnational threats;
- stationing of forward-deployed, battle-ready forces (with accompanying US personnel) on military bases;
- prepositioning of equipment needed for potential expeditionary operations;
- direct US Navy patrols of Gulf waterways, including port calls;
- joint naval exercises in the Gulf on a bilateral, trilateral, or very limited multilateral basis among Gulf states; and finally,

- bilateral defense and security agreements of a diplomatic nature between the United States and individual GCC states, which formalize and solidify all of the above elements on a flexible basis.¹⁴

In the realm of strategic diplomacy, the Obama administration also briefly tried a nascent, new approach to Iran by engaging Tehran in a language of “respect,” reaching out diplomatically to signal symbolic acceptance of the Islamic Republic’s existing regime.¹⁵ However, when this was not immediately and fully reciprocated—and when spring 2009 elections in Iran showed strong signs of rigging, followed by mass repression and violence against Iranian protestors¹⁶—there was the usual presidential return to strong efforts to push middle or rising powers throughout the world to end their existing economic, energy, technological, and military ties with Iran while insisting that Iran suspend all enrichment options.¹⁷ This has included constant US efforts to highlight to other nations that Iran is a “militarized dictatorship” actively in defiance of UN resolutions that call for both enrichment suspension and greater Iranian transparency.¹⁸ The United States has continued to insist that all UN member states enact and support a multilateral coercive strategy that is largely transatlantic in origin, involving especially Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. This US approach has refused to seriously consider or embrace any compromise solutions that have thus far been offered by other non-Western rising powers. It is to this issue of rising-power views, interests, motivations, and strategies that we now turn.

International Constraints on US Coercive Strategies

There are many rising powers in the world that disagree with US interpretations of what it means to implement or enforce the NPT, and this disagreement goes well beyond the much-vilified usual suspects of China and Russia, who are often depicted as uniquely obstinate in undermining concerted and principled multilateral actions in the UNSC as members of the P-5.¹⁹ This account of the problems caused by China and Russia is self-serving, in that it ignores similar policies by other rising powers that the United States is separately trying to court in different issue areas (e.g., Turkey, India, Brazil). This partial account of the facts also obscures the reality that asking Iran to submit to all IAEA requests for information and asking it to forgo all enrichment capabilities for all time are indeed two different matters. In particular, any country has a right under the NPT to

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acquire peaceful nuclear infrastructure, regardless of others' assessments of its ultimate intentions, providing that it fulfills all IAEA safeguard requirements in regards to transparent verification. In contrast, the traditional and long-standing US (and increasingly European) position is that even if Iran submits to all IAEA requests, it still cannot or should not be allowed its own enrichment and/or reprocessing infrastructure. This is not necessarily supported by the NPT text, and, indeed, the United States and its European allies are on opposite ends of this issue with middle and rising powers such as Brazil, Turkey, China, Russia, and South Africa. Despite yet a fourth round of UN sanctions imposed by the UNSC in 2010, key neighboring states Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are not doing all they can to enforce the new measures in financial and trade relations with Tehran,²⁰ and the new sanctions were diluted in any case by India, Russia, and China in their first drafting. Also, at the symbolic level, both Brazil and Turkey voted against the sanctions as temporary Security Council members at that time.²¹ Because of this reality, the toughest sanctions to date remain those of the United States and the West as a whole, representing a selective or partial form of multilateral pressure. Ironically, the toughest congressionally passed sanctions, whether in direct or indirect support of UN resolutions, are often diluted in practice by successive US presidents (of either party) because of the desire and need to maintain good relations with other global power centers, including allies in Europe, the Persian Gulf, and even Asia.²²

Overall, non-Western developing nations and rising powers (beyond Iran's own Arab Gulf neighbors) are demonstratively not moved by US arguments saying that Iran is an unrepentant rogue or militarized state, both domestically and internationally, that must be treated like a pariah and totally isolated. Strategic competitors to the United States and various other rising powers—including India, Russia, China, and even US allies Turkey and South Korea—have burgeoning energy, defense, and diplomatic ties to Iran.²³ These powers all interpret the NPT to mean that Iran *does* have a right to enrichment. Their problem is rather in the area of Iranian transparency and intentions. For instance, the United States can expect Turkey and Brazil to continue to play a classic “nonaligned” role as cultural and political mediators between East and West, North and South, essentially giving a less ideological face to programs and demands already made by the P-5, such as compromise proposals by Russia. They will continue to capitalize on the inherent political capital built up as part of their own

grand strategic foreign policies of “zero problems with other countries.”²⁴ Additionally, Brazil has innate political capital with Iran because of the tortured history of its own illicit nuclear program in the 1970–80s.²⁵

India, for its part, will continue to be “tactically tough” on short-term votes by the IAEA board of governors (of which India is a member) against Iran’s continuing opacity on supplying data, albeit just enough to ensure continuing smooth strategic relations with the United States. However, it will also continue to cooperate with Iran on building oil and gas pipelines on Iranian territory to get badly needed fuels to India’s economy as well as modernizing Iranian energy transportation infrastructure, possibly even making Iran an energy transportation hub linking Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East through new ports and railroads. It may in fact do the latter in cooperation with Russia and China. Further, India can be expected to support Iran in niche areas of conventional defense technologies and weaponry (e.g., India recently supplied better fuel batteries to Iran’s Russian-made submarines, as well as servicing its naval and air force equipment). It will also continue pursuing strong cultural ties that emphasize commonalities between Iran’s Shia culture and India’s own burgeoning Shiite population.²⁶

Meanwhile, Russia will continue to use the P-5 diplomatic process (inside and outside the UN) to push forth compromise proposals that involve enriching and/or storing fuel on Russian soil as a way to give Iran a symbolic claim to autonomy but also giving the West what it wants on nonproliferation. As part of such a strategy, it will still oppose tougher, “crippling” sanctions toward Iran in the P-5 diplomatic process as part of a larger position that honestly does not consider a heavily monitored, conditioned enrichment program to be a strategic threat (i.e., Russia will continue acting on its analysis that “zero enrichment” is not feasible and, in terms of curtailing threats, is not even needed). More expansively, in terms of geopolitics beyond the nuclear portfolio, Russia can be expected to continue to curtail US and NATO geopolitical and geostrategic influence by cooperating with Iran (as well as China) on Caspian Sea, Central Asian, Caucasus, and South Asian issues. It will undoubtedly increase strong bilateral trade links with Tehran, providing Iran with consumer goods, foodstuffs, and oil and gas equipment as well as assistance on infrastructural projects. In the Gulf conventional military context, it will keep supplying important niche military defense capabilities such as ballistic missile technology and contracts for a range of jet fighters, helicopters,

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submarines, tanks, and air-defense missile systems to Iran. Finally, the delays caused by Stuxnet aside, Russia will help run, maintain, and service the Bushehr nuclear power reactor as a part of Iran's nuclear infrastructure that does not pose the most serious danger of weaponization, including supply of needed feedstock.²⁷

China will also oppose tougher, so-called crippling sanctions toward Iran in the P-5 diplomatic process, diluting US and European efforts as part of a larger position that closely mirrors that of Russia.²⁸ China will not abandon its argument that civil nuclear programs are allowed by the NPT, thereby strongly supporting middle-ground compromise positions offered by other powers such as Turkey, Brazil, and Russia. Like Russia, China will curtail US and NATO geopolitical and geostrategic influence by cooperating with Iran in Central Asian energy issues, especially natural gas pipelines. It will seek to increase strong bilateral trade links with Tehran, providing Iran with consumer goods (such as the manufacturing of Chinese automobiles in Iran) and oil and gas equipment as well as assistance on infrastructure projects such as highways, metro systems, and airport runways.²⁹

Indeed, this behavior of powers outside the Gulf is mimicked by some of Iran's own neighbors—principally the UAE, Turkey, Qatar, and Bahrain—who allow and even encourage dense (il)licit financial and commercial ties to the Islamic Republic, even while hosting US military bases and buying billions of dollars in advanced weaponry from the United States and other Western sources. Arab neighbors, in particular, strongly distrust and even fear a potential transnational, covert religious and ideological (political) threat from Iran due to continuing and long-standing concerns that Tehran can illicitly manipulate or aid discontented minority groups or ideological Islamist extremists within their own populations—a fear now stoked more recently by the unpredictable domestic social movements constituting the “Arab Spring.” Additionally, to add more fuel to the fire, the GCC has made blunt public statements alleging that Iran set up a covert spy ring in Kuwait, for which Kuwait expelled several Iranian diplomats in spring 2011 (while passing a death sentence for three of the covert agents).³⁰ Nonetheless, even these sovereignty-conscious GCC monarchies are justifiably afraid of taking a polarizing approach that would completely trade relations with Iran for relations with the United States, or vice-versa. They are more pragmatic, preferring to undertake insurance policies with each side simultaneously, across all instruments of power but the military factor

(the latter of which definitely is one-sided toward the United States).³¹ The United States has not had, and still will not have, the leverage necessary to get Brazil, India, Russia, China, and Turkey (and even Arab neighbors) on board with a strictly zero-sum, multilateral coercive approach. These actors' energy, trade, finance, and strategic cultural ties with Iran are simply too numerous and strong.

Iranian Strategic Perceptions

Another drawback to the current all-or-nothing counterproliferation strategy is that US policy has traditionally and erroneously assumed that there is no significant moderate opposition to nuclear hard-liners, meaning that a more nuanced approach that allows some level of domestic Iranian enrichment is automatically ruled out. The reality, instead, is that the nuclear issue is a barometer of different views from contending elite groups on Iran's proper relations with the rest of the world.³² This is witnessed by the recent fact that some very prominent conservatives, such as Mohsen Rezaei, former leader of the Basij militia in the 1980s against Iraq, have called for middle-ground options such as the creation of an international nuclear consortium on Iranian soil, with the implied message that there would be a permanent foreign presence in Iran as part of such a consortium.³³ Indeed, in addition to effectively ignoring middle-ground options in the domestic Iranian debate such as Rezaei's, the current US approach also feeds into the cynical and acutely insecure worldview of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, validating his hard-line perception of global intentions, thereby justifying his equally hard-line domestic and international policies.

Further, the US approach ignores the fact that moderate factions have entrenched views about Iran's idealized security role in the Gulf, albeit without the religious element added into the mix. Even secular nationalists and reform-minded globalizers tend to believe or argue that Iran is the "natural" or "organic" pillar of Gulf security, or that Iran is the sovereign country most ideally placed to provide for "indigenous" Gulf security. Thus, many Iranians of all ideological stripes will continue to believe that Iran has a special place in providing the public good of security in the Persian Gulf, which means that these Persian nationalist views will have to be massaged and managed no matter which regime is in charge. Indeed, the most ardent nationalists (whether religious or secular) are dead

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set on keeping the three islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, a claim of historical and legal ownership that remains hotly disputed by the UAE. There is no significant Iranian faction that doubts the necessity of keeping these islands under firm Iranian military occupation and control.³⁴ Implicitly, therefore, if not explicitly, Iranian leaders (with nationalistic support from citizens) presume a right to have at least some say in conventional military control of the Strait of Hormuz.³⁵ However, there are indeed perceptual and value-based attitudes among the current elites that are traceable to the specific experiences and ideology of the Islamic Republic as its own unique regime. Beyond widespread and diffuse Persian nationalism, it is important to keep in mind that Iran is equally motivated by concerns of regime preservation against perceived external socioeconomic, ideological, and military threats. Additionally, this particular regime is motivated by a desire for religious influence throughout the region, both international and transnational.³⁶

Reigning Islamic-Iranian political elites are motivated principally by an obsession with political independence and autonomy tied to original revolutionary rebellion against the Western-led global order. Iran's Islamic elites thrive on isolation and hardship, both politically and diplomatically. They routinely react to economic coercive measures with even stronger revolutionary rhetoric externally and tightened elite consensus across disputing factions internally.³⁷ In turn, Iranian zero-sum interpretations of US actions are based on long-held historical grievances and feelings of strategic victimhood, which have resulted in broadly shared patterns of thought, attitudes, and belief systems that cynically assume both unending ideological hostility and crass imperialist designs on the part of Western nations. These psychological realities are due to such concrete events as the 1953 coup against the democratically elected, left-Islamist-nationalist leader Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh (engineered explicitly by the US Central Intelligence Agency with support from Britain);³⁸ Western support of a shah who relied increasingly on torture and repression in the 1960s and 1970s to ensure his domestic rule; and the West and the world turning a blind eye to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 and subsequent use of chemical weapons against both Iranian soldiers and civilians in the eight-year war. Notably, in regard to the latter, Western actions included commercial sales of dual-use chemical materials to Iraq (tacitly approved by the US administration) and even direct provision of valuable operational intelligence to the Iraqi war machine.

Thus, the Iranian elites' core concern with existential security of the state and regime preservation is based on a past that has included an all-out Iraqi missile war on civilians and cities as well as chemical weapons attacks indirectly aided by intelligence from the United States to Saddam. The overall Iranian strategic worldview is, in essence, that it lives in an unstable, threatening geopolitical environment and has suffered horribly at the hands of others in war, showing that a powerful deterrent of some kind is necessary.³⁹

One pernicious result of Iran's violent internal and external history is a resulting disdain for the moral validity and operational effectiveness of international law, which is of special importance for Iranian reactions to any US counterproliferation policies undertaken in the name of the universal NPT legal regime. In particular, the "prolonged and deeply problematic trauma"⁴⁰ felt by leading Iranian elites after experiencing strong Western and Arab support of Saddam's most extreme military operations in the 1980s has led one influential hard-line Iranian columnist to declare in 2008 that "our world is not a fair one and everyone gets as much power as he can, not for his use of reason or the adaptation of his request to the international laws, but by his bullying." In the view of many Iranian political authorities, "The international community's tepid response to such an egregious violation of Iran's sovereignty taught Tehran not to place faith in abstract principles or the world's willingness to defend them."⁴¹

Iran is motivated by an "acute, abiding sense of insecurity," as described by Iran experts Suzanne Maloney and Ray Takeyh, in which the focus on regime survival can engender *both* conservative, cautious international behavior *and* hostile, rigid behavior in the face of threats—a confusing foreign policy reality that can be hard for outsiders to fashion their own strategies around. When US and other foreign diplomats deal with Iran, for instance, mediators soon find out that "Iranian leaders exploit every opening, pursue multiple or contradictory agendas, play various capitals against one another, and use pressure tactics—including the limited use of force—to advance their interests."⁴²

Through a Glass Darkly—the Unfounded Extremes of US Threat Perceptions

What are the concrete consequences of attitudinal leadership traits in Tehran? Simply put, the most efficacious US strategy toward Iran and

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toward the Gulf as a whole would recognize that in the *short term*, purely coercive, zero-sum strategies play into existing Iranian threat perceptions, exacerbating instead of mitigating Iranian fears and hostility toward both its neighbors and the West.⁴³ In the *long term*, a US strategy should also recognize that, beyond this particular regime in Tehran, the above strategic beliefs (and associated deep cultural values and emotions) are held by a wide array of elites in Iran. Thus, Iran's most worrying geopolitical behaviors are not likely to completely disappear even with more-moderate elites in power, even as they will certainly be lessened and be accompanied by much more flexible and "soft" diplomacy than the Islamic Republic typically uses.⁴⁴

However, these latter strategic turns will not be possible if US decision makers do not themselves question their own most extreme threat perceptions regarding Iranian goals. In Washington, particularly on Capitol Hill, it is often assumed that Iran's primary motive, intent, or goal is to produce nuclear warheads at the first possible moment, followed quickly by direct, first strikes against Israel and/or sharing with transnational terrorists for immediate use against US targets. That is, US *policymakers* (not necessarily the nongovernmental, think tank-based analyst community) often act as if Iranian exit from the NPT and explicit declaration of nuclear weapons status is a foregone conclusion once Iran has a moderately sustainable enrichment capability in being. Further, the strongly implied or even explicit claim in many US security pronouncements is that Iran desires to hand over nuclear weapons to global terrorist groups who are itching to kill as many Americans as possible.⁴⁵

For instance, the influential, Capitol Hill-connected Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) has released a steady stream of major, comprehensive, and heavily cited formal annual reports on the Iranian proliferation threat, notably involving analysts associated with "both sides of the aisle" and helmed symbolically by sitting senators and former military officials. These reports, as a body, have explicitly derided the idea of relying on Cold War-style deterrence of even a latent nuclear Iran due to the assumed ideological nature of the Islamic Republic, instead calling for even stronger sanctions aimed at choking off any and all enrichment capacity. For instance, in support of their main policy recommendations (centered on the presumed ability to steadily bring other rising powers even more strongly behind such coercive instruments in a renewed multilateral front), the first BPC report (2008) argued that

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The danger of the Islamic Republic developing military nuclear technology is multifold. A nuclear-ready or nuclear-armed Islamic Republic ruled by the clerical regime could threaten the Persian Gulf region and its vast energy resources . . . provide nuclear technology to other radical regimes and terrorists, and seek to make good on its threats to eradicate Israel. The threat posed by the Islamic Republic is not only direct Iranian action but also aggression committed by proxy. Western policymakers do not have the luxury of omniscience with regard to the state of Iran's program or the Iranian leadership's intentions. . . . That Iran's nuclear program remains shrouded in ambiguity only escalates the threat it poses. U.S. policymakers must consider the worst-case scenario—a first strike by Iran against U.S. interests or allies. Such a strike might occur directly or by proxy, with the Iranian leadership seeking to maintain deniability. While a primary target may be Israel, Iranian leaders may consider other targets: U.S. military bases or Saudi oil fields. In such strikes, the Iranian leadership need not rely on traditional delivery systems. There may be a strategic advantage for Iran, again in terms of deniability, if any nuclear device is ship or truck-borne rather than on a ballistic missile. Any use of an Iranian nuclear device may open U.S. policymakers to blackmail: following use of a nuclear device, Iranian leaders or terrorists may argue that they have other bombs pre-positioned in Western population centers or near other strategic targets and that they might detonate such bombs should there be either retaliation against Iran for its use of nuclear bombs, or should Western authorities not accede to specific demands.

To be clear, this analysis also mentions other threats that are more widely shared by the entire Washington policy community of experts and analysts, including the possibility of destabilization of oil prices and the creation of new, urgent incentives for nuclear proliferation by Iran's Arab neighbors—the latter, indeed, has already been mentioned in this article. However, it is in regard to the notion, described in the above quote, of an Iran that is ready and willing to either (a) use a bomb itself against US citizens, Israel, and/or Arab regimes or (b) give already-assembled bombs or bomb-making materials to terrorist proxies where bipartisan US accounts of the Iranian nuclear and terrorist threat seriously falter and overstate the case.

Yes, Iran funds and equips anti-Israeli terror groups.⁴⁶ But if Hamas or Hezbollah were to use nuclear weapons, they would obliterate themselves and their own homeland. Other than raising money abroad, these groups are tied to local concerns in their neighborhoods—neither group is a credible candidate for attacks against New York or Los Angeles. Hezbollah exists largely to serve its own Shiite citizens in Southern Lebanon, a large ethno-religious demographic that is not represented by the minority Sunni and Christian order that controls most wealth and government programs in Beirut—itsself a result of unjust, legacy colonial institutions left in place

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by the French after World War II. Of course, Hezbollah is not content with this domestic mission; it also views violent opposition to Israel as a part of its founding identity, and it is currently aiding fellow Shiite brethren in Iraq, both socially and militarily. Meanwhile, Hamas exists to oppose Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza through terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens as well as providing social services and political representation to portions of the Palestinian populace. But despite such extreme behaviors toward Israel, neither group truly wants to strike American soil; neither is opposed to globalization per se, as is the case with Sunni fundamentalist groups such as al-Qaeda; and neither would even know what to do with a working nuclear weapon (again, unlike al-Qaeda).

Why do such distinctions matter? If Iran's nuclear and anti-Israeli policies are equated with the global terrorist threats of radical Sunni groups such as al-Qaeda, then US bargaining with Iran over its policies will remain impossible. US threat conflation creates a world in which the only viable US policy option toward Iran is eventual precision military strikes against nuclear facilities, should sanctions ultimately fail to reverse all of Iran's previous decisions to build up nuclear infrastructure. US military strikes would, in turn, cause an escalation of tensions throughout the region. Iran would work even harder to strengthen the most militant elements of anti-Israeli groups, doing all it could to undermine an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Arab citizens, already disillusioned by the US invasion of Iraq, and now galvanized by a wave of revolutionary movements across Northern Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf, would react to the US use of military force negatively—perhaps even violently—across the Middle East. Further, preventive military strikes with a counterproliferation mission would promise strong retaliation by Iran through missile strikes on Arab neighbors, blocking of Gulf shipping, and paramilitary retaliation via all arms of the Revolutionary Guards, including in Gaza and Lebanon. Brutal repression against the Iranian domestic populace itself would certainly increase.⁴⁷

Internationally, US military actions would also be roundly criticized and unsupported by all other power centers except perhaps an increasingly impatient Western Europe and Israel. Such policy would win the battle but lose the war in terms of international institutions; while saving the NPT in narrow terms, military strikes would jettison and jeopardize *all new* forms of multilateral, rule of law–based cooperation between rising global power centers, given the full extent of various rising powers' energy, trade,

and cultural relations with Iran. In the long run, even the narrow goal of saving the NPT would be lost, as more nations would come to equate the NPT with aggressive, hegemonic military strikes of a unilateral nature.

Finally, Arabs themselves, despite their innate distrust of Persian-Shiite Iran, prefer nonpolarizing approaches and, while welcoming the end of the Iranian proliferation threat, would not welcome an increased threat of a more generalized hostility from Iran across the Strait. Indeed, forward Arab bases would be used in US counterproliferation strikes, and in addition to the immediate danger of missile counterstrikes by Iran, a militarized conflict with Iran could end lucrative trade and financial ties with its neighbors, upon which smaller monarchies such as Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE to varying degrees depend.⁴⁸

Why All Is Not Lost—the Historical Pattern of “Nuclear Opacity” in the Developing World

Despite the mixed motives of rising powers and their irksome and complex behaviors; despite the existential nature of Iranian threat perceptions; *and* despite the costs of preventive military strikes on Iran by the United States, there is still real hope for something other than a Gulf region defined by nuclear proliferation. The same variables that motivate insecure developing countries to seek nuclear infrastructure also motivate those self-same powers to proceed cautiously, incrementally, and with great trepidation in regards to building actual stockpiles of weapons-grade materials. Moreover, even if a cache of weapons-grade HEU is illicitly created, there are extremely strong incentives for the proliferator to refrain from actual weaponization of such stockpiles via creation of warheads and their emplacement on working delivery vehicles. Simply put, Iran is hardly the first case of attempted or latent nuclear proliferation in the developing world (formerly the third world), and past cases offer useful lessons for current dilemmas. Consider the formative period for many actual and potential proliferators, namely the late 1950s up to the end of the twentieth century. During this period, although not commonly recognized because of the Washington policy community's focus on the bipolar battle of communism versus capitalism, there was already an ongoing period of “maximum danger” in terms of an outbreak of nuclear weapons states. Notably, Brazil, Argentina, South Korea, South Africa, North Korea, Taiwan, Pakistan, India, Israel, Iraq, and Iran all either acquired “bombs in the basement” or came

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perilously close to doing so at various points during this period. During this relatively short historical interval, all of these states (excepting the military junta–led Brazil and Argentina) experienced acute problems of conventional force imbalances and/or extraordinarily high defense burdens vis-à-vis their main neighboring rivals, and many of them were also isolated from the larger international system due to controversies over their original formation as new countries and their ideological identities. In essence, all of these states represented postcolonial cases of “contested sovereignty” vis-à-vis their nearest neighbors and rivals. For some, contested sovereignty extended to the international system as a whole.

For instance, Taiwan, South Korea, South Africa, Israel, North Korea, Iran after 1979, and Iraq after 1958 all lacked broad support from the international system during the Cold War and relied upon one or two main arms exporters for both finished platforms and a stream of parts for maintenance—primarily the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. While Pakistan and India were relatively more diplomatically and morally accepted by the international system as a whole during this period, they nonetheless followed the same pattern of nuclear opacity as their more globally isolated cohorts due to fears of losing support from their primary patrons (i.e., the United States for Pakistan and, after 1971, the Soviet Union for India) as well as fears of pushing each other to escalate the latent nuclear arms race. Perversely, while all of these nations’ security situations dictated a pursuit of the “ultimate weapon” during one or more of the decades stretching from roughly 1960 to 2000, the self-same geopolitical circumstances that made them insecure also put strong constraints on their proliferation behavior. In addition to the fear of losing military aid, economic aid, and diplomatic support from their main security patron—upon which they were desperately dependent—a fully verified nuclear capability in these regional threat environments could have caused a full-blown technological arms race between the proliferant and its main antagonist(s).⁴⁹

Because of these competing, contradictory incentives and pressures, proliferation activity in the third world has typically been of a nascent, “opaque,” hard-to-pin-down nature.⁵⁰ This has been true even of those states which demonstrably became real nuclear weapons powers, including Israel (1960s); India (with a “peaceful” test explosion allowed by the NPT in 1974); and South Africa (late 1970s up to the end of apartheid).⁵¹ On the one hand, third-world proliferants have needed to be both self-

sufficient and strong in their bargaining positions with their main suppliers, but at the same time, their status in the world community and their continued supply of arms have been contingent on the tacit agreement that they *not* acquire the bomb in full nor keep it secret if they did.⁵² Unfortunately, this is a factor often missed in US and even European debates but one which scholars from multiple proliferant countries in the developing world have been careful to outline.⁵³

The nature of this tightrope act can easily be seen in the case of South Korea, which historically has depended on the United States for massive deployments of troops and equipment to equal the forces of the North, and which continues joint equipping and training with the United States despite the North's conventional weakness in the twenty-first century. Even during the peak of the ideological Cold War, Taiwan and South Korea both harbored grave concerns over the reliability and sincerity of US support. When Presidents Nixon and Carter separately declared the US intent to pull back from foreign commitments in 1972 and 1977, respectively—which corresponded with the strengthening of relations with both the Soviets and China under *détente*—South Korea and Taiwan responded by making threatening moves toward converting their energy-related capabilities to nuclear weapons production. Recently, evidence has come to light that clearly shows they were pursuing a weaponization track in the later decades of the Cold War due to fears of the sustainability of US security commitments after Vietnam and doubts about US strategic loyalties during rapprochement with mainland China. Although it is not common knowledge, South Korea continued various experiments on chemical reprocessing of fuel for separation of plutonium and laser-based uranium enrichment into the 1980s. Both of these ongoing activities represented small but significant illicit projects that remained hidden to the IAEA until a full report was issued by the government in 2004. Ultimately, Taiwan and South Korea only veered off of this track (at repeated points in the 1970s and 1980s) after strong behind-the-scenes US bilateral diplomatic arm-twisting, continued security guarantees, and conventional weapons sales.⁵⁴

Still today, Japan and South Korea have nuclear enrichment infrastructures they could weaponize as quickly as could Iran—if they made an illicit decision to do so—because their overall technical and industrial capacities are simply more advanced and their access to international markets for nuclear materials and nuclear industry components are clearly so much better (i.e., they are not under draconian US and global sanctions regimes). On

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the missile front, South Korea now has its own growing space program, in league with Russia, while Japan has a fully indigenous, latent ICBM capability via its space program to launch satellites into geosynchronous orbit. Taiwan also has been garnering substantial missile capabilities. While not commonly talked about in Washington debates, these latent nuclear and missile realities in South Korea and Japan, as well as some level of continuing technical nuclear expertise in Taiwan, do in fact have a strong bearing on twenty-first-century US conventional and nuclear commitments to all three Northeast Asian powers. This includes provision of a “nuclear umbrella” over Japan and ramped-up conventional exercises with South Korea after the North’s recent bellicosity and provocations at sea, as well as limited but still strategic “niche” arms sales to Taiwan for its defense.

Looking across the entire arc of instability over the past 50 years, it seems that the motivations for proliferation in a non–great power context tend to mitigate against the most extreme versions of great-power nuclear practices, making conflict management between rivals potentially easier despite the existence of opaque proliferation in regional threat environments. The recent balancing act between regional adversaries in the developing world—involving equally the technological, military, and political instruments of power—underscores the complex and tenuous relationship between the (latent) proliferant, its primary regional adversaries, the main arms suppliers, and the international community. Crucially, since an openly declared nuclear force would jeopardize the supplier-recipient relationship between great-power patrons and smaller states while also possibly jolting the main regional rival into similar proliferation activities, the proliferating nation has historically been induced to keep its capabilities nascent rather than real as long as possible. For instance, the fear of engendering adverse reactions from each other as well as patrons such as the United States and the Soviet Union could even be seen in the Indian and Pakistani cases, despite the less absolute nature of their international isolation compared to some other proliferants of this period. Fearful of being the first one over the edge, both countries kept their capacities strictly latent or opaque until the momentous Indian decision to test in 1998.⁵⁵ India’s tests, in turn, were meant to herald its rise to strategic equality with a burgeoning China after India had essentially shrugged off its 1970–80s Cold War dependence on the Soviet Union for most heavy conventional arms. That is, India’s tests were conducted less with an eye toward its main rival, Pakistan, and more with an eye on

traditional realpolitik and great-power competition, reflecting the global strategic reality that by the 1990s, India and China were both clearly “rising” at the same time that India’s former patron, the Soviet Union, fell apart and then precipitously declined as an ailing Russia. Thus, the historical norm of opaque proliferation in unstable parts of the developing world illustrates that the Gulf is not entirely geopolitically unique in the realm of conventional and nuclear issues—despite the absence of a revolutionary Islamic regime in other regions. It also shows that the United States has played this game before and has sometimes come out on the winning end, successfully managing some quite delicate and difficult security transitions in unstable regional environments.

The Historical Pattern as Played out in the Gulf Today

Iran is a preeminent case of this general dynamic, given that all of its Persian Gulf Arab neighbors (the six GCC states) and even Middle Eastern states further afield, such as Jordan and Egypt, have publicly declared that they are now pursuing their own peaceful nuclear energy programs, albeit without indigenous enrichment or reprocessing. In all of these recent Arab pronouncements and programs, there has been an implicit but very strong hint that if Iran weaponizes its own moderate uranium enrichment infrastructure, Gulf Arab states (and perhaps even Arab countries further afield) will not be far behind in pursuing nuclear arsenals themselves.⁵⁶

Now consider Iran’s main conventional weapons suppliers—China and Russia—who also, importantly, supply a multiplicity of other goods such as infrastructure projects for general development, some level of oil and gas exploitation infrastructure, financial aid, and trade. In the mainstream US policy debates, these patterns of behavior are routinely cast in a negative light—namely, as behavior the United States and its Western allies cannot control or constrain and which threatens the viability of the global NPT regime. However, Russia’s and China’s relations with Iran constitute a double-edged sword for Tehran because the simple fact is that Iran is increasingly dependent on these two particular rising powers for achieving its socioeconomic as well as nuclear objectives. For instance, Western experts often note that Russia and China make international enforcement of proliferation norms toward Iran extremely difficult because of their conventional arms supplies to Iran, which fill important defense niches that might allow Iran to challenge the United States and its friends and

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allies in any future militarized crisis over Gulf shipping. Or, for that matter, such capabilities may also challenge any US retaliatory actions in response to Iranian support of terrorist groups or attempts to weaponize its latent nuclear capacities. As described by one watcher of both the regional and global security scenes,

Chinese technology transfers and, in particular, the sale of Silkworm anti-ship missiles to Iran in 1986, posed several problems for Washington. . . . Significant global oil travels through the narrow Strait of Hormuz, which is only 34 miles wide and connects the Gulf of Oman to the Arabian Sea. The Strait consists of 2-mile-wide channels for inbound and outbound tanker traffic, as well as a 2-mile-wide buffer zone. Iran dominates the Strait in part through its control of key islands inside the Gulf and positions along the northern coast of the Gulf. As a result, Iran could harass oil tankers exiting the Gulf as it did when US ships re-flagged Kuwaiti tankers in 1986–87. Iran tripled the number of missiles deployed on its Gulf coast and began fitting Chinese-built cruise missiles on its naval boats in 1995–96, which added a “new dimension” to its threat. Beijing’s arms connection to Iran troubled Washington enough that Secretary of Defense William Perry raised it with his Chinese counterparts as “the first issue” that could be a “potential flashpoint” in Sino-American relations.⁵⁷

Similarly, despite the fact that Russia decisively broke an earlier contract to sell its most advanced S-300 surface-to-air defense missile system in June 2010,⁵⁸ most experts still fully expect it to keep supplying important niche military defense capabilities, such as jet fighters, helicopters, submarines, tanks, and air-defense missile systems to Iran, given Russian interests in balancing US hegemony both globally and within the region.⁵⁹

Where US policymakers are rightly concerned, they are wrong in perceiving only one-half of the complex relationship between the proliferant and its conventional arms patrons. Completely in line with the historical patterns outlined above, recent history shows that even China will continue to pressure Iran by signaling that weaponization of a latent Iranian nuclear capability would endanger all of the above positive bilateral interactions and Chinese support.⁶⁰ Notably, one oft-neglected but extremely effective constraint on Iranian aggressive behavior toward its sovereign Arab neighbors within the Gulf (including proliferation behavior) is that China is already pursuing—and will increase its pursuit of—all practical trade, financial, oil, and natural gas relations with Iran’s Arab neighbors. China has purposefully and explicitly employed florid, grand diplomatic rhetoric in its evolving bilateral relations with GCC monarchies, using phrases such as “building a new Silk Road” in press releases describing

strategic meetings with new Arab partners.⁶¹ China is therefore essentially signaling to Iran that it is not a passive patron that would support all-out Persian primacy toward its weaker neighbors in the region. Put more bluntly, it is hard to imagine a future in which Russian and Chinese arms sales to Iran continue after Iran has undertaken unprovoked hostilities towards its neighbors or proceeded to build up large stockpiles of LEU or HEU under nontransparent conditions. Strategic Chinese diplomatic, trade, financial, and energy relations with the Arab monarchies in particular militate against complacency on this issue, despite its support of a peaceful nuclear infrastructure in Iran under the NPT Article IV.

Iranian Weaponization—International Coup d'État or Regime Suicide?

Even if China and Russia support Iran in ways that actually show astute realpolitik and strategic balance and moderation, what about the leaders of Iran itself? Iran's religious-political leaders have been infamous for their diatribes and threats of destruction against all enemies, using dramatic and passionate rhetoric during Friday sermons and even in diplomatic forums. Whatever its rhetoric of the moment, the Islamic regime in Tehran is hardly suicidal, even given the ideological nature of its strategic worldview. It is certainly true that Iran's nuclear energy program does have strong potential for use in weapons production, a fact that could negatively affect regional stability. Certainly, immediate weaponization of latent weapons capacities and a dramatic exit from the NPT by Tehran's hard-liners would shore up revolutionary credentials and Islamic revolutionary goals of self-sufficiency, independence, and autonomy. Iran also would no longer suffer the huge economic costs of its nuclear program without the full benefit—that is, the attainment of a true nuclear deterrent and the security it would bring. As per the theory of nuclear deterrence, Iranian weaponization might conceivably stop Israeli and American preemptive military threats once and for all, since both powers would be unsure of 100-percent success in preemptive strikes and would fear nuclear escalation and retaliation even for conventional strikes against Iran. Possibly, “mutual assured destruction” would work as it always has, making Iran secure from conventional as well as nuclear strikes on its territory against its facilities or people. And arguably, as happened in the Pakistani and Indian cases,

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the international community would eventually learn to live with a nuclear Iran, and current coercive sanctions would end.

There are undoubtedly some hard-line leaders in Iran who believe this security narrative. However, it is important to keep in mind the paradoxes innate in Iran's decision-making calculus, which is highly similar to other cases of latent proliferation in other regions of the developing world. Iran, as with other cases of opaque proliferation before it, faces significant disincentives for immediate and effective weaponization of its nuclear infrastructure.⁶² If Iran were to become an explicit nuclear weapons power, its neighbors would be suddenly fretting about the "nuclear balance," possibly tempted to go nuclear as well. Saudi Arabia is already a leading candidate for acquisition of a working nuclear weapon, potentially by inviting Pakistani mobile nuclear regiments into the Kingdom.⁶³ If Pakistan were to become involved in Saudi nuclear deployments or the Saudis were to build a fully indigenous program, hostile and distrustful nuclear powers would surround Iran on all sides (keeping in mind that Pakistan is, like the Arab monarchies, a mainly Sunni-oriented state, despite "normal" relations with Iran at the present moment). This would certainly lead to greater interstate tension within the Persian Gulf and larger Middle East. Iranian weaponization could even cause countries such as the UAE, Jordan, and Egypt to consider proliferation, jeopardizing Iran's current policy of mixed, pragmatic relations with the Arab Gulf monarchies by subsequently making them all-out enemies with US bases on their soil.

It is also important to keep in mind that, currently, Arabs are skeptical, fearful, and worried about Iran, but they are also distrustful of their own patron, the United States, due to policies of the past 10 years in Iraq and toward Israel.⁶⁴ Iran therefore has some respite from Arab fears and angers via the simple fact that the Arabs do not completely trust their own security patron. In contrast, under a future scenario of explicit Iranian weaponization or even just the creation of greater and greater stockpiles of LEU or HEU without any apparent restraint, Arab neighbors would become zero-sum enemies of Iran alongside the United States, endangering the already existent and quite substantial (and highly profitable) trade, financial, and other ties built up between the Revolutionary Guards and all of Iran's neighbors, including even its enemy in the Gulf islands dispute, the UAE.⁶⁵ But the strongest cost would be the one thus far avoided: a likely huge spike in coercive multilateral sanctions, agreed upon by all of the P-5, all of Europe, and most likely Turkey, Brazil, and India. In short,

a weaponization strategy would guarantee a great deal of both short-term and long-term pain, and given present domestic unrest and economic weaknesses, this could actually create an existential threat to regime stability in Tehran.⁶⁶

In the end, Iran is likely to follow the path of a latent weapons power, purposefully not constructing an explicit, fully weaponized arsenal, but rather cultivating and maintaining a hedged nuclear weapons infrastructure, much like India did from 1958 to 1998 or like Northeast Asian powers such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have done on and off at various times since the 1970s (e.g., via some mix of enrichment, reprocessing, and missile capabilities). Again, as already shown, this gray-area option historically has been the path most embraced by would-be proliferators who have felt themselves in dire security straits, from South Africa to South Asia to Northeast Asia, because it gives both the security benefit domestically and internationally of having a nuclear program without incurring the global opprobrium of clearly breaking the rules of the NPT.⁶⁷ Staying within the legal limits of the allowed enrichment of materials indefinitely could create an atmosphere of constructive ambiguity that would provide Iran with international deterrent value, nationalist ideological value (in terms of revolutionary credentials at home and abroad), and a general sense of safety from acute, existential security concerns harbored by the regime. Finally, nuclear opacity would guarantee the continued flow of some important conventional weapons capabilities to Tehran from powers such as India, Russia, and China.

Managing a Latent Nuclear Weapons Power

Even accepting the current and evolving reality of nuclear opacity in the Persian Gulf, military threats still have a central place in any US strategy toward the region. The question is toward what outcomes are military threats issued? Once American and Israeli strikes are ruled out as too ineffective and too costly, and once one admits the hard truth that achieving “crippling sanctions” is an extremely low-probability event (given both the mixed interests of other non-Western powers and the dismal track record of coercive instruments in general), the only reasonable strategy remaining is a movement toward a more geopolitically savvy framework for action that relies on both conventional and nuclear deterrence to allow indefinite conflict management in a fluid Gulf security environment.

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Such a strategy would still include continued strict monitoring by the IAEA, based itself on further compromises with the West and non-Western rising powers that would ideally forestall Iran creating a large LEU stockpile. However—and this is the key—the West would accept, once and for all, some level of enrichment capacity on Iranian soil, probably around levels of 3.5–20 percent, which Iran has already reached in limited quantities. In short, by accepting Iranian gains in this area, the United States would be attempting to make Iran's latent weapons capacities less and less opaque in nature, trending toward a future wherein Iran has the ability to enrich but transparency of its activities has markedly increased over time. In return, as such a scheme is being negotiated and implemented gradually in real time, the United States should be willing to enact more far-reaching proposals for easing the most punitive trade and financial sanctions toward Iran, in line with IAEA-required increases in Iranian transparency in all aspects of its program.

This said, it is unrealistic to expect Iran to agree to any new and dramatic intrusions on its sovereignty via the traditional diplomatic routes of the so-called P-5+1—the primary Western great powers of the United States, Germany, Britain, and France alongside permanent UNSC members Russia and China. Crucially, for diplomacy to have any realistic chance at all in stabilizing the current status quo, this approach would explicitly seek the help of other prominent rising powers in the global system whose own interests and ideological viewpoints are far closer to Tehran's perspective than that of Western powers. This would narrow the current regional-global gap in geopolitics that exists due to the all-or-nothing US counterproliferation agenda, which largely remains based on transatlantic agreement with European (i.e., Western) powers.

In particular, a truly new approach would enlist several G20 rising powers with past or current sensitive nuclear histories, such as South Africa, India, and Brazil, to work directly with Iran to construct genuinely new technical and political schemes for materials storage and verification, at the same time gradually opening the door to multilateral negotiations on other sensitive regional security concerns. Turkey should also be centrally involved due to its interesting and increasingly complex status as a regional neighbor of both Iran and Europe, a G20 power, a globalizing and rising economy, and a recent reputation for blazing its own path in foreign policy in ways that have gone against traditional North Atlantic security concerns. Meanwhile, on the military front, US forward deployments on

Arab soil would continue, albeit geared toward the long-haul task of deterrence of Iranian weaponization rather than achieving the purist goal of nuclear rollback in Tehran.

To arrive at this new framework of multilateral verification and control, the US strategic switch would gradually hand over substantial diplomatic heavy lifting and bargaining responsibilities to myriad influential rising powers such as South Africa, Turkey, Brazil, and India, albeit with constant, close interactions and norms of common consent behind the scenes between these powers and the IAEA, the United Nations, and the P-5+1. This hand-off is necessary due to Iranian beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that are innately distrustful of, and hostile toward, the West as a whole. Essentially, non-Western rising powers would be used as grand strategic mediators in new diplomatic processes that together firmly commit Iran to nuclear transparency and multilateral involvement in its nuclear programs. The final outcome of this grand strategic switch would ideally be explicit international involvement by non-Western powers and the IAEA in new storage, monitoring, and handling options for Iran's most-sensitive nuclear materials, ideally involving transnational storage of LEU, repatriation of spent fuel from reactors, and strict limits on the amount of 20-percent LEU that could be produced for research purposes. Once this process is underway, the United States should ultimately allow past nascent deals with Western multinational corporations to proceed, especially in areas having to do with modernizing Iran's deteriorating oil and gas extraction, processing, and storage infrastructure. Eventually, this new diplomatic process could perhaps even produce an internationalized nuclear consortium on Iranian soil with international scientific and technical personnel working alongside Iranian cohorts on a continuous basis, a policy option already proffered in broad terms by some conservative Iranian political elites themselves in internal political debates as a solution that meets Iranian strategic cultural concerns of independence, sovereignty, and autonomy while making illicit diversion of materials for further enrichment to weapons-grade levels via batch recycling extremely difficult.

This last option would, in effect, involve the internationalization of the most-sensitive Iranian facilities, in which the facilities involved in enrichment would still be on Iranian soil but would be "multilateralized" in management and day-to-day operations. The purpose of pursuing such a concept of operations would not be to shackle Iran by inserting external agents but rather to increase its global standing as a leader in inventive,

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new political and operational mechanisms for a world that is likely to see the growth of more nuclear energy programs across the developing world rather than fewer.⁶⁸ It is in essence an acceptance of (admittedly vague) proposals put forth by moderate conservatives such as Mohsen Rezaei in internal Iranian political debates as a way to square the circle of Iranian nationalism and international fears of proliferation

Precedents are already being set in this regard. Specifically, Turkey and Brazil attempted in 2009–10 to intervene at the diplomatic level as relatively neutral mediators between the strict counterproliferation demands of the West and the autarkic, revolutionary demands for total behavioral autonomy by the Islamic Republic. In 2010, they negotiated a new version of a previous fuel swap agreement with Iran, in which it would exchange 1,200 kg of its stockpile of LEU for 120 kg of fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor. Importantly, the core idea of this deal was that, during the time that is required to produce the fuel, Iran's LEU would be held in escrow by Turkey, which is a more trusted actor with cultural characteristics and geographic similarities that make it a more value-neutral territory for this deal. While the time has arguably passed for the technical specifics of this one narrow deal to be implemented, due to further Iranian LEU production at 5-percent and 20-percent levels,⁶⁹ the episode has nonetheless created a diplomatic and technical precedent for future similar deals with any number of rising powers who are not constrained by the pernicious security dilemmas of the Gulf. Thus far, the United States has reacted largely with skepticism, wariness, and even fear to the actions by these rising powers in the global system.⁷⁰ However, if such international interventions can help ensure management of a prickly Iran with a latent nuclear weapons infrastructure, thereby decreasing opacity through a continued IAEA presence in Iran (as mediated and negotiated by rising powers), then this can only be positive.

Finally, given Iran's inherent ambitions for primary influence within its own subregion of the Middle East (the Gulf) and also possibly toward Israel and the Levant (the Greater Middle East), there would be a strong continuation of US bilateral security assurances of a military nature to the six Arab Gulf monarchies and Israel. This would include even more explicit rhetoric by the United States in the sense of stronger, more-formalized deterrent threats against a potentially revanchist Iran. Thus, while direct, face-to-face multilateral nuclear negotiations would be largely delegated to non-Western powers with more legitimacy in Tehran, the United States would

still for its own part set up a purposeful and explicit strategy of military deterrence of potential Iranian aggression in any of its possible forms. The United States would certainly continue such deployments in its ongoing role as the global guarantor of oil and gas supplies from the Gulf. As noted in the most recent *National Military Strategy* released by the Joint Staff in February 2011,

Leveraging our capabilities and forward presence . . . we will be prepared to act as security guarantor—preferably with partners and allies, but alone if necessary—to deter and defeat acts of aggression. . . . The United States, allies, and our partners *will often compete with others for influence in an environment where persistent tension is the norm.* . . . This requires America’s Joint Force possesses the reach, resolve, and ability to project decisive military power. . . . Joint assured access to the global commons . . . constitutes a core aspect of U.S. national security and remains an enduring mission for the Joint Force. . . . In support of our Nation’s interests, the Joint Force will take a strong role in international efforts to safeguard access, sustain security, provide oversight and accountability, and promote responsible norms in the global commons (emphases added).⁷¹

Redefining Counterproliferation—Policy Clarity through Conceptual Clarity

Despite being completely in line with the new joint US military strategy, our policy prescriptions in the specific case of Iran may still contain heresy in current Washington and wider Western debates. But this middle-ground approach has a strong historical foundation. The idea of containing enemies by monitoring developments via intelligence and the local diplomatic capabilities of friends and allies is what the West ended up doing in the Cold War in Europe and Asia. It is important to remember, in this regard, that the original containment policy of the United States, particularly the one explicated by George Kennan,⁷² explicitly foreswore, by the late 1940s, the idea of “preventive war,” which would have been inherently offensive and first-strike in nature. Preventive war would have aimed at decimation of Soviet military-industrial capabilities and perhaps even total regime change in Moscow, rolling back communism once and for all via decisive military force. Indeed, the US Air Force was seriously entertaining such first-strike possibilities up until the moment the Soviets tested their first nuclear weapon,⁷³ and even progressive philosophers such as Bertrand Russell toyed with the idea before resigning themselves to an ideologically bipolar world. Instead, Kennan and other US elites

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ended up embracing and creating a more nuanced framework that involved neither appeasement nor preventive war, but rather a long-term approach of *managed competition* that involved a use of force more in line with the security literature's conception of denial of enemy aims in both peacetime and wartime.⁷⁴ Specifically, by the late 1960s and the inauguration of the "flexible response" military strategy, the United States practiced deterrence via threatened conventional and nuclear weapons denial of Soviet territorial gains in the event of war.

There is a comparison to be made here with Iran. Counterproliferation as currently outlined by both Democrats and Republicans alike since 1992 would ask the US president to do everything necessary, even preventive war, to erase completely Iranian nuclear gains, not unlike the active speculation about US preventive war against the Soviet Union in the period 1945–49. In contrast, denial and deterrence would mean creating a norm of capped Iranian capabilities short of producing a stockpile of weapons-grade HEU and explicit weaponization. Though hardly an exact analogy, this more-mixed approach toward Iran would be completely in line philosophically with the idea of containment first laid out by Kennan and other US leaders at the start of the Cold War toward a well-armed, revolutionary, and ideologically charged Soviet Union—only this time, aimed at the Gulf regional geopolitical theater and at lessening nuclear opacity, increasing transparency, and deterring formal weaponization rather than deterring an opponent's actual use of a nuclear arsenal.

Put in more generic terms, there is a fundamental difference, both conceptually and operationally, between asking an opponent to undo an achievement it has already accomplished in concrete fact versus deterring it from undertaking further policies and actions that go against the status quo. The former is referred to as *coercive diplomacy* or *compellence*, while the latter is *deterrence*.⁷⁵ When we say, therefore, that *counterproliferation* should be redefined in US language and practice as "deterrence of Iranian nuclear weaponization and all other forms of Iranian regional aggression," we mean fundamentally that the United States accept the status quo, as it exists today, of a demonstrated partial capability of the Iranians to create low-enriched uranium. The question then becomes not "How do we best reverse Iranian gains?" but rather, "How do we construct processes and relations so that Iran's ability to produce some amount of LEU does not irreparably damage the NPT, regional Gulf security and stability, and the global energy security regime?" Thus, redefining counterproliferation in

the Persian Gulf in the twenty-first century ultimately means Western acceptance of *some level of risk* that Iran could illicitly divert some amount of this LEU to make at least one bomb's worth of weapons-grade, highly-enriched uranium—most probably, by somehow eluding inspectors to perform batch recycling of its 3.5–20 percent enriched uranium to even higher, potentially weapons-grade levels.⁷⁶ However, this risk would be actively mitigated by the creation and implementation (with other parties) of new, inventive technological-physical constraints on Iran's nuclear program, positive economic and financial incentives to Iran as part of these new constraints (that go far beyond the anemic economic “carrots” offered by the United States in the P-5+1 process thus far), and a refocusing of US military threats.⁷⁷ In other words, acceptance of risk is certainly *not* a one-way strategic street. When we argue for a new US and international counterproliferation strategy based on deterrence, containment, and engagement, we also mean the United States is not going away in terms of ensuring a reliable, safe, and stable flow of oil and natural gas from the Gulf outward to the globalized world system. The latter fact, in turn, has direct implications for what the United States will accept in terms of Iranian behavior beyond what it is already doing today, both in its nuclear program and its regional behaviors as a whole.

With this in mind, a new approach would involve a thorough, upfront construction of a fully fledged US deterrent and containment military posture, certainly requiring explicit forward planning by CENTCOM and others at the concrete operational-tactical levels.⁷⁸ It would mean a move away from the de facto approach seen so far in which a deterrent policy is only latent in US security assurances toward individual Arab states.⁷⁹ Deterrence and containment should instead be announced as the explicit grand-policy option for the Gulf region under which security assurances with Gulf Arabs, and toward Israel, would continue. For this approach to be truly sustainable politically, US leaders and the US national security establishment as a whole would have to adopt a revised US threat perception, decisively dropping the popular but empirically dubious assumption that Iran's primary intent is to put mushroom clouds over Tel Aviv and Washington as part of an irrational, messianic, and even suicidal approach to foreign policy. However, we are not just talking about changes in US perceptions and practices. Under the umbrella of deterrence and containment provided by the US military, this approach would require that diplomacy by non-Western rising powers be done strategically and carefully, not ad-hoc,

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to ensure ever-greater IAEA access and confidence in its findings.⁸⁰ Thus, while accepting a certain amount of nuclear opacity upfront in the process with Iran, it should be the goal of the United States, its allies, rising powers, and the IAEA to make Iranian activities less opaque over time.

Lastly, this US change in focus would recognize that there are international moderates in Iranian politics who favor a more balanced, globalized, pragmatic approach to the rest of the world, less based on hard-line revolutionary identity and credentials and more on economic and financial openings.⁸¹ This means that the United States should proffer compromise packages that would involve serious alleviation of trade and financial sanctions in exchange for Iranian cooperation on internationalized, multilateral nuclear fuel schemes as broadly described above. That is, unlike current policy, the United States would fully plan to ease or even erase some of the most drastic and punitive sanctions if Iran takes positive steps toward transparency and multilateral engagement well short of the current Western-defined threshold of zero enrichment on Iranian soil. The United States should be comfortable with such radical proposals even if it expects the hard-liners to refuse them, because this refusal in itself would allow the informal but widespread publicizing of Iranian hard-liner intransigence for full domestic and international effect. This said, absent a changed US and international strategy as outlined herein, a public diplomacy campaign to play on internal Iranian schisms would either have no effect or would even seriously damage the cause of Iranian policy moderates, given that the current counterproliferation strategy has such drastic, isolation-based sanctions and coercive rhetoric in place. In the present US and global policy context, therefore, any outreach to a more moderate faction would in fact injure that faction domestically. It is only under a new framework of deterrence, containment, and conditional engagement—in which some Iranian nuclear fuel cycle gains are finally recognized and accepted—that a smart public diplomacy would in fact have any real or positive effect.

Historical realities have a large bearing on this grand-policy recommendation. The primary problem with today's Western strategy is that nuclear proliferation in the developing world has always involved rather harsh regional geopolitical realities that have bucked the system first created by the United States and its allies after World War II. These pesky regional realities have ineluctably involved a complex blend of realpolitik power-seeking with unique cultural, ideological, nationalist, and other value-based variables at the local level—as opposed to diffuse concerns

with global norms such as those in the NPT.⁸² Our arguments attempt to equally balance global needs with local geopolitics, as well as balance the realpolitik concerns of the rising powers of the East alongside the “rules-based” predilections of the West. In sum, the time for nuclear rollback has come and gone. Now it is time for a new approach. **SSQ**

Notes

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