



A Strategy for Nuclear Iran

By Thomas Donnelly

Regardless of who is elected to the presidency in November, the growing threat posed by a nuclear Iran is certain to be at the top of the next administration's national security agenda. Unfortunately, neither a "grand bargain" with Tehran nor a conventional military strike against its nuclear facilities offers much hope of preventing one of the world's most dangerous regimes from acquiring the world's most dangerous weapons. In the short term, at least, the United States must instead work to isolate Iran not only militarily but ideologically, by succeeding in the democratic transformation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Islamic Republic in Iran continues to speed toward acquiring nuclear weapons, with every week, it seems, bringing further evidence of its progress. In late September, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Gholamreza Aghazadeh, announced his country had begun enriching a "test amount" of uranium—enough, that is, for several nuclear weapons. Soon, there will be no insurmountable hurdles left; it is simply a matter of engineering, time, and Tehran's choice. This is a reality that the next U.S. administration will have to confront—and a very unpleasant reality it will be.¹ As Max Boot recently observed:

[Iran] is also working on missiles with the range to strike targets in Europe and North America, though the likeliest vehicles for delivering an Iranian nuke would be its terrorist networks. Hassan Abasi, a senior member of the Revolutionary Guards, recently boasted that Iran had "a strategy drawn up for the destruction of Anglo-Saxon civilization."²

The anxiety raised by the prospect of nuclear-armed Iran is creating a "Do Something!" moment in Washington. Boot, a strong supporter of the Bush administration's strategy for the greater Middle East, allows that, "on Iran, as in so many other areas, the administration seems to be paralyzed by disagreements between Defense Department hawks and State Department doves."³ The Democrats, by contrast, have made a point of advocating a "grand bargain" with the mullahs that would allow them to keep their nuclear power plants in exchange for a promise to give up the kind of nuclear fuel used to make bombs. Upon closer inspection, however, the idea of a grand bargain is quickly revealed to be no bargain at all. Instead, it is merely a recycling of the Clinton-era "Agreed Framework" with North Korea, a widely celebrated bit of arms control that did nothing to prevent Kim Jong Il from acquiring his current arsenal. Undeterred by that failure, Senators Kerry and Edwards have made a point of advancing a "non-confrontational" approach to Iran that emphasizes areas of "mutual interest."

Kerry is not the only one eager for engagement with Iran; indeed, this has been a pet project of many American diplomats since the Iranian revolution of 1979. A more tempered version of the Kerry "grand bargain" proposal—call it the "modest bargain" alternative—is

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encapsulated in the recent report, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).⁴ As is so often the case, this “task force” of foreign policy mandarins calling for a new approach is really just rehashing old ideas. Thus, the CFR report finds:

[Tehran] could play a potentially significant role in promoting a stable, pluralistic government in Baghdad. It might be induced to be a constructive actor toward both Iraq and Afghanistan, but it retains the capacity to create significant difficulties for these regimes if it is alienated from the new post-conflict governments in those two countries.⁵

Thus, inevitably, it is the council’s recommendation that the United States “engage selectively with Iran to promote regional stability.” This, in the task force’s eyes, constitutes a “revised strategic approach to Iran.”

At least the CFR task force acknowledges that the “grand bargain” notion “that would settle comprehensively the outstanding conflicts between Iran and the United States is not a realistic goal, and pursuing such an outcome would be unlikely to produce near-term progress on Washington’s central interests.”⁶ However, the depth of the differences between the United States and Iran is no excuse for restricting “engagement,” in the report’s view, and in particular the use of “incentives,” including expanded trade relations: “Given the increasingly important role of economic interests in shaping Iran’s policy options at home and abroad, the prospect of commercial relations with the United States could be a powerful tool in Washington’s arsenal.”⁷ Even more saliently, the task force believes that, while the United States is right to advocate democracy, America should abandon the “rhetoric of regime change, as it would be likely to rouse nationalist sentiments in defense of the regime even among those who currently oppose it.”⁸ While willing to forgo the grandeur, the Council of Foreign Relations hates to pass up a bargain.

Indeed, to the extent that the CFR report proves anything, it is that the Cold War is not over: it lives on, and not just in time-warp regimes like Kim Jong Il’s North Korea or Saparmurat Niyazov’s Turkmenistan, but among the strategic smart set in the United States, for whom *détente* never dies.

Alas for the Council on Foreign Relations, and at last for the rest of us, the real world has moved on.

New geopolitical facts obtain, and the United States has started to formulate new strategies based upon them. And given that the “greater Middle East”—the immense swath of the planet stretching from West Africa to Southeast Asia—is now the central strategic focus of American security policy, our approach to the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be written freely on a blank sheet of paper.

Remember the Bush Doctrine?

Whatever the outcome of this November’s election, some version of the “Bush Doctrine”—whose main purpose is to preserve the generally liberal, stable, and peaceful international order that has resulted from the collapse of the Soviet empire and that is predicated upon the United States’ role as global guarantor of international security—is likely to continue. Just as the Bush Doctrine represents, in some sense, a continuation of the *de facto* policies of the Clinton administration, a Kerry administration would likewise discover that it is hard to retreat from the responsibilities of unipolarity. As much as the Democratic Party might wish to bury its head in the strategic sand, and despite its deep-seated hatred of President Bush, there is no quiet life for the world’s sole superpower.

In particular, Kerry’s pretense of a return to the status quo in the greater Middle East, of balancing one thuggish regime against another and making strategy in partnership with Western European “powers” such as France and Germany, is impossible to take seriously in a post-9/11 world. Even if the United States could neatly withdraw from Iraq—itsself an almost oxymoronic formulation—the war on terrorism would not end and would still include many other actors besides Osama bin Laden.

Thus there may be little alternative to the Bush Doctrine’s “forward strategy of freedom”; a purely defensive approach is impossible exactly because the pre-9/11 political order in the region was the primary source of the nihilism and violence that led to those attacks. The Bush Doctrine’s fundamental set of premises may prove remarkably stable: the rollback of both Islamic terror organizations and the governments that support them; containing China’s military ambitions; and, key to it all, preventing any true “axis of evil” that marks a conjunction of Islamic radicalism with the rising great-power capabilities in Beijing.

This strategy is nothing if not ambitious. We are attempting to resolve a massive civil war within the

Islamic world while simultaneously preventing a dissatisfied China—even more dependent for its economic growth on Middle Eastern oil than the United States is—from interfering with our efforts. The Bush administration’s occasional confessions about the magnitude of the effort required—reflected in Defense Secretary Rumsfeld’s forecast of a “long, hard slog” in Iraq and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice’s profession of a “generational commitment” to the project of transforming the Middle East—only begin to hint at the task before the United States. The only good news is that, while our enemies are many, they are individually weak and not immediately disposed to unite against us.

Sources of Iranian Conduct

Iran stands directly athwart this project of regional transformation. Indeed, the regime in Tehran came to power by ousting Shah Reza Pahlavi in the tumultuous year of 1979, when the old, autocratic order in the greater Middle East began to crumble. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established an unabashedly theocratic and revolutionary government, at the same time calling for a broader Muslim uprising and attacks upon the United States, the “Great Satan.” And despite international isolation, devastating defeat in war, and widespread internal unrest, the regime retains its ideological character, as well as a firm grip on power. As the Council on Foreign Relations notes, the Islamic Republic has achieved some “durability.”⁹

But if its political and strategic ends have been consistent, Tehran’s means have changed dramatically. One of the best studies of the Iran-Iraq War, done by the United States Marine Corps, observed that the casualties of that conflict were so great that it essentially bled the Iranian revolution to death.¹⁰ Khomeini and his fellow mullahs were more than willing to spread revolution by conventional military means, but a generation of young Pasdaran zealots broke itself in human wave attacks on Saddam Hussein’s army; what the U.S. military was able to do so decisively in 1991 and again in 2003—slice through the Iraqi field force—the Iranian army could not manage even at the cost of perhaps a million casualties over eight years.

If Iran could not export its revolution by conventional military means, then unconventional means would have to suffice. Iran’s sponsorship of terrorists is well-known. As the U.S. State Department’s most

recent report on global terrorism puts it, “Iran remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism in 2003. Its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Ministry of Intelligence and Security were involved in the planning of and support for terrorist acts and continued to exhort a variety of groups that use terrorism to pursue their goals.”¹¹

From Beirut to Buenos Aires, international terrorism has been central to Iran’s foreign policy since the 1979 revolution. Tehran openly provides funding, training, and weapons to Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Iran also has a long relationship with al Qaeda. As early as late 1991, Sudan’s Islamist leader, Hassan al-Turabi, sponsored meetings designed to encourage Shia and Sunni fundamentalists to put aside their differences and work together against the United States. “Not long afterward,” according to the 9/11 Commission report, “senior Al Qaeda operatives and trainers traveled to Iran to receive training in explosives.”¹²

Senior al Qaeda operatives captured by the United States have revealed that Tehran attempted to strengthen its ties to Osama bin Laden after the USS *Cole* attack in 2000, and that Iranian officials have facilitated the travel of al Qaeda members through their territory, failing to stamp their passports. It is also believed that eight to fourteen of the 9/11 hijackers took advantage of this arrangement to transit through Iran in 2000–2001.¹³

After the fall of the Taliban, several senior al Qaeda operatives fled to Iran, where they have found a safe haven from which to plot further attacks—including the May 2003 terrorist bombing in Riyadh, in which thirty-four people were killed.¹⁴ Although Iran claims to hold several al Qaeda members in custody, it refuses to disclose their identities publicly and has rebuffed attempts to arrange for their transfer.¹⁵

Yet for all the vehemence of its ideology and the violence of its anti-Americanism, the clerical regime in Tehran has found itself incapable of stemming the seeping U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf and in the broader region. While Iran essentially stood aside when Operation Desert Storm drove the Iraqi army from Kuwait and contained Saddam Hussein’s regional ambitions, the war ushered in the policy of “dual containment,” targeted at Tehran as well as Baghdad; indeed, the first Bush administration left Saddam in power primarily to serve as a bulwark against Iranian

expansionism. The “no-fly-zones” and other U.S. operations in the area throughout the 1990s attested to the fact that, even with no real regional partner—beyond the on-again, off-again support offered by the Saudis—the United States was more than capable of maintaining its military forces at Iran’s doorstep and had no intention of withdrawing.

And while the mullahs may have celebrated the attacks of September 11, 2001, they have come to rue many of the subsequent events. Although there was little love lost between Tehran and the Taliban, the expanded American military presence along Iran’s eastern flank is far from welcome. The invasion of Iraq, though it removed Tehran’s longtime nemesis in Baghdad, completed the near-encirclement of Iran by U.S. military forces. Iran’s attempts to influence the direction of post-Saddam Iraq have yet to produce anything more substantive than its past efforts to undermine Saddam; Tehran’s sponsorship of Moqtada al Sadr have helped the “Mahdi army” make headlines, but the finality with which mainstream Iraqi cleric Ayatollah Ali al Sistani evicted Sadr’s forces from the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf suggests that the majority of Iraq’s Shia still have little interest in taking orders from Iran.

Under such apparently bleak circumstances, Tehran’s traditional hankering for nuclear weapons has sharpened significantly. Iran’s conventional options are now restricted to attempts to limit American access to the region, such as by pointing missiles at the Straits of Hormuz and bolstering ground-based air defenses. Terrorism with a return address carries greater risks, too: it is interesting to speculate what the U.S. reaction would be now, in a post-9/11 world, to a Khobar Towers–type bombing. What the Iranians could safely sponsor in 1996 might not be so safe now. The surest deterrent to American action is a functioning nuclear arsenal.

What to Do?

To be sure, the prospect of a nuclear Iran is a nightmare. But it is less a nightmare because of the high likelihood that Tehran would employ its weapons or pass them on to terrorist groups—although that is not beyond the realm of possibility—and more because of the constraining effect it threatens to impose upon U.S. strategy for the greater Middle East. The danger is that Iran will “extend” its deterrence, either directly or de facto, to a variety of states and other actors

throughout the region. This would be an ironic echo of the extended deterrence thought to apply to U.S. allies during the Cold War. But in the greater Middle East of the twenty-first century, we are the truly revolutionary force and “revolutionary” Iran is more the status quo power.

The attitudes of the Council on Foreign Relations Iran task force reveal this dynamic with creepy perfection. Aware that the fundamental strategic choice on Iran is between policies of regime change and détente, the consensus among the task force members is that the problem is the weapons, not the government building them. Indeed, the report makes it clear that the task force was divided about the state of Iran’s nuclear program:

Although Task Force members voiced differing opinions on whether evidence is sufficient to determine that Iran has fully committed itself to developing nuclear weapons, the Task Force agreed that Iran is likely to continue its pattern of tactical cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency while attempting to conceal the scope of its nuclear program in order to keep its options open as long as possible.¹⁶

But if there were nuances about the state of Tehran’s nukes, there seems to be consensus about American policy: forget the regime-change idea and concentrate on the weapons. By focusing narrowly on the issues of Iran’s weapons, any discussion of the larger consequences for American policy can be avoided.

What would the consequences be of a bargain with Iran—be it grand or small—for a strategy of political transformation in the greater Middle East? Is it possible to pursue détente with Iran and regime change elsewhere?

Throughout the greater Middle East, any overt bargain with Iran will surely be read as a retreat on the part of the United States. Three years after September 11, the question remains: do the Americans have the strength, stomach, and sincerity to carry through their project of democratization and regional transformation? Observers in the Middle East can see that President Bush is committed, but there are doubts about the rest of his government. The world’s other industrial powers are either openly afraid and thus hostile, skeptical, or at best noncommittal; but for a handful of allies, America stands alone. If John Kerry becomes president, he will backpedal—and the message in the region will be clear.

Détente with Iran would compel the forces of freedom in the Middle East to further hedge their bets, and our sometime allies, like the Saudis, who through the 1990s tried to reach an accommodation with Tehran, would equally reckon that U.S. ambitions for change had overleaped themselves. Even Pakistan—congenitally unstable and prone to play all ends against the middle absent unceasing American attention—might toy with the idea of reversing its post-9/11 policies.

A bargain with Iran would also have global effects. The most serious would not be in France or Germany, whose governments have made it plain that they have no heart for transformation in the Middle East or for a serious effort to oppose Iran, but in China. Beijing and Tehran share a mutual dissatisfaction with the Pax Americana and have a long record of direct and indirect cooperation on nuclear and missile programs. Hu Jintao and the new generation of leaders in China have a much larger, global perspective than did Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping before them, greater confidence flowing from China's economic modernization, and, almost certainly, an appetite to play the geopolitical game more actively. Their horizons very clearly extend throughout the greater Middle East—China's energy interest in Sudan already poses the single greatest roadblock to stopping the genocide in Darfur, for example—and they are deeply conscious of the potential U.S. stranglehold on China's future growth. Torn between their interests in U.S. security guarantees and a desire for greater autonomy, Beijing will keenly note, and perhaps be happy to broker, any bargain for Iran.

Regime Change by Other Means

If détente with a nuclear Islamic Republic jeopardizes the project of Middle East transformation, then direct military confrontation is an equally unappetizing method of regime change. In the heat of the “Do Something!” moment, the difficulties of even limited military strikes are too little appreciated. While a full discussion of the operational realities is beyond the scope of this essay, some hard truths are worth mentioning. Iran is large, populous, rugged, and its nuclear facilities are spread throughout the country. Its nuclear program probably cannot be crippled in a single, surgical strike, as was Iraq's in Israel's famous Osirak raid.

And, speaking of the Israelis, it is not uncommon to hear the hope expressed among U.S. policymakers, albeit *sotto voce*, that they will somehow solve the

puzzle that perplexes us. Earlier in September, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported that Tel Aviv was planning on buying 500 bunker-busters, precisely the kind of munitions that might be able to destroy Iran's underground nuclear facilities.¹⁷

In truth, however, a preemptive strike by Tel Aviv would be exceedingly difficult. Israel's long-range strike capacity is a fraction of the U.S. military's and would, as a matter of logistics, require at least American acquiescence (we own a good deal of the airspace between Tel Aviv and Tehran). And even if, miraculously, an Israeli strike achieved some tactical success, the Iranians would surely hold us responsible and target U.S. interests in retaliation. In sum, punitive strikes cannot be designed to end the Iranian nuclear threat nor ensure regime change, as our decade-long experience with Saddam Hussein should remind us.

Nor, it seems, can traditional, “multilateral” diplomacy. From Khartoum to Tehran, the “international community” is proving again that it is unwilling to confront renegade regimes. Iran's flouting of the IAEA and the UN also takes a page from Saddam's book. Despite growing evidence of Iran's nuclear malfeasance, many countries are reluctant to sanction it for what they view as its legitimate right to develop a complete nuclear fuel cycle.

Alas, the primary burden of isolating and containing a nearly nuclear Iran rests with the United States. Like so much of our future work in the greater Middle East, this must be a long-term effort requiring patience and resolve. The first order of business is to keep Iran from establishing a deeper relationship with great-power sponsors. Breaking Tehran's ties to China will be difficult, given the fact that no American administration, Republican or Democrat, has yet been willing to force Beijing to choose between the constraints and the benefits of the Pax Americana—witness Taiwan, North Korea, and now Sudan. Better hopes lie with India, which, if pressured to scale back its links to Iran as the price of a real strategic partnership with the United States, might become a serious future ally.

The second order of business is for the United States to retain the initiative in its new project of reform and transformation in the greater Middle East. The real isolation of revolutionary Iran will come when it is drowned in a larger sea of liberal, accountable governments in the region. If democracy takes hold in Afghanistan—where ten million have registered to vote in October's presidential election, far

more than expected—and Iraq—where, despite a continuing counterinsurgency campaign, the transitional government of Iyad Allawi has pledged to hold a vote this January—Iran’s dictatorship will come under increasing pressure.

In a curious way, Iran suffers from both the Middle East’s great maladies—it is both a sclerotic autocracy and a backward-looking theocracy. The success of democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq not only will surround Iran strategically, but ideologically as well. In the final analysis, supporting and expanding the forces of freedom in the region offers, for now, our best hope for containing Iran and diluting the value of its nuclear deterrent.

Notes

1. The author is indebted to Henry Sokolski, director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, for making available the draft report, *Restraining a Nuclear-Ready Iran: Seven Levers, A Report of NPEC’s Competitive Strategies Working Group*, September 13, 2004. Though the conclusions about Iran’s nuclear program are the author’s, they rest heavily on the innovative and original research that NPEC has conducted.

2. Max Boot, “Bush Can’t Afford Inaction on Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2004.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert M. Gates, coauthors, *Iran: Time for a New Approach* (New York: Council on

Foreign Relations, 2004). Accessed at http://www.cfr.org/pdf/Iran_TF.pdf.

5. *Ibid.*, 2.

6. *Ibid.*, 3.

7. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

8. *Ibid.*, 4.

9. *Ibid.*, 1.

10. Douglas V. Johnson and Stephen C. Pelletiere, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War, Volume I*, Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 3-203, 1990.

11. *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, April 2004). Available at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2003/>.

12. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (July 2004), 61. Available at http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report_FM.pdf.

13. *Ibid.*, 240–241.

14. Douglas Jehl and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Suggests a Qaeda Cell in Iran Directed Saudi Bombings,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2003.

15. *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, April 2004). Available at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2003/>.

16. Brzezinski and Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, 2.

17. Craig S. Smith, “Iran Moves Toward Enriching Uranium,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2004.