

US-Iran Relations: Perils and Promises

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For over a quarter of century, the US and Iran have been hostile towards each other. The problem began with the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent taking of American hostages in Tehran. Even before the Revolution, many Iranians were bitter toward the US for helping the British to overthrow their democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosadeq in 1953, and to support Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the dictator whom the Revolution overthrew. The bitterness that ensued turned into a fierce anti-Americanism during the Revolution and precipitated the storming of the American Embassy in Tehran by young Islamic radicals. Although the hostages were released unharmed after 444 days in captivity, this episode has created a negative ripple effect that continues today. From two friends and partners, the US and Iran have become two enemies, harming and demonizing each other ever since.

Currently, two “ultra” conservative governments in Washington and Tehran face each other. Will the “extremes meet”? Only time can tell but evidence suggests that this hostility will continue unabated, and Iran’s nuclear program is providing the pretext. After Iran’s negotiations with the EU Trio (Britain, France and Germany) collapsed in 2004, and the US and its European allies convinced the Board of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on September 19, 2005, that it should report Iran to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions to stop its nuclear enrichment activities. Meanwhile, Russia and China, while maintaining serious reservations about sanctions against Iran, have joined the US-EU alliance in demanding that Tehran suspend uranium enrichment program as a precondition for a negotiated settlement of the nuclear crisis. The so-called 5+1 group (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) has invoked the Chapter Seven of the UN Charter that would authorize the use of force if Iran were to defy the demand. The basis for such an action would be Iran’s concealment of its nuclear activities in the past and the lack of adequate transparency about its current intentions and activities. Both at the IAEA and at the Council, the US faces serious obstacles towards its attempts to punish Iran. Nonetheless, it is probable that the US and its allies will ultimately succeed in isolating and eventually confronting Iran unless Tehran abandons its enrichment program according to their schedule.

The latest chance for the opening of a new dialogue, provided by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s visit to the US to participate at the UN sessions in September 2005 was unwisely lost. Indeed, the speeches by the two presidents, while avoiding name-calling or direct threats, did not offer any hope that the situation would improve any time soon. Mr. Ahmadinejad warned against “unilateralism” and “pre-emptive” actions against other nations (presumably Iran), and Mr. Bush reiterated his now famous line that: “the rulers of the outlaw regimes ... will not be allowed to threaten the peace and stability of the world.” In subsequent months, Mr. Ahmadinejad has followed a contradictory and unsuccessful approach that has included increased hostility toward Israel and offer of dialogue with the US (he called Holocaust a myth and said that Israel should be wiped off the map at the same time that he wrote a letter to Mr. Bush and asked for a debate with

him). The only positive American overture has been an offer of indirect talks on the condition that Iran agree to suspend its uranium enrichment programs. Yet, as we shall argue below, both sides have no better option than to engage in an honest dialogue toward the normalization of relations. It is unfortunate that no state or international organization, including the UN, established to further peace and friendship among nations, feels obliged to mediate a rapprochement between Iran and the United States.

Perspectives and Options for the US

Secretary George Shultz in a private conversation with this author at his home on the Stanford University campus in summer of 2001 summarized the American view of Iran since the Revolution in four points. First, that Iran is a very important country; we should have never lost its partnership and now that we have, we need to regain it. Second, that no regime has harmed the US more than the Islamic Republic of Iran, and that it is going to be difficult, if not impossible, to mend relations with this regime. Third, that we understand that the Iranian religious leadership would change its behavior in areas of nuclear technology, terrorism, and Middle East peace if subjected to American military force, but that is not an option that we could entertain unless no other options were left. Finally, that there is only one mutually beneficial solution to our problem, to begin a dialogue that will help normalize relations, and that this dialogue has to begin with building confidence at the highest level.

Secretary Shultz made these remarks immediately before the September 11 tragedy. Since then the world has changed, particularly in the Middle East, and so have US-Iran relations. The American military has destroyed a terrorist regime in Afghanistan and a dictatorship in Iraq wrongfully alleged to have weapons of mass destruction and links with terrorist groups. Both countries remain politically unsettled and economically in shambles. Yet, after the successful elections there, the Bush administration has been able to absolve itself, at least partially, of its responsibility for this situation, and has increasing paid attention to Iran. American forces are now stationed at a stone's throw from Iran's forces. Meanwhile, Washington has been threatening Iran with additional sanctions and the use of force, and according to certain reports, a small contingent of American intelligence forces might have already entered Iran. Iran's presidential elections in June of 2005, which produced an ultra-conservative religious administration, and the deadlock in negotiations over Iran's enrichment programs have in the meantime convinced Washington that it should adopt a more explicit regime change policy (see my article, "In the Name of the Iranian People - Regime Change or Regime Reform?" at <http://www.american-iranian.org/pubs/articles/IntheNameoftheIranianPeople-03-22-06.pdf>).

While the Bush Administration has been struggling with a new Iran policy, a few think tanks and pressure groups have offered their recommendations. The Council on Foreign Relations has recommended that the US "selectively engage" Iran to address critical US concerns and broaden linkages between the Iranian population and the outside world. The Committee on Present Dangers has suggested that the US adopt a policy of engagement

and regime change by opening a dialogue with Tehran, supporting the Iranian people, and simultaneously convincing the Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei to relinquish power. The Iran Policy Committee has recommended that the US consider a combination of coercive diplomacy, destabilization by the MEK, and limited military operations to facilitate regime change. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy has recommended that the US work with the EU Trio on the nuclear matter but keep the option of surgical military strikes open, and simultaneously assist the opposition. Finally, the International Crisis Group has put force the idea of a “grand bargain” with Iran, whereby the two countries agree to settle all outstanding disputes at once.

The American Iranian Council (AIC), a research and policy institute devoted to improving understanding and dialogue between the two countries, has recommended that the US and Iran undertake a number of “confidence-building measures” as a prelude to negotiations for establishing diplomatic ties without preconditions, except for the conditions of genuinely free elections in the future, protection of human rights, and the role of law in Iran. They then should work judiciously toward resolving issues of mutual concern focusing on the more easily resolved issues and on common interests. For the process to move forward, both sides have to be sincere in their pursuit of a normal relationship and realistically address the key domestic and regional challenges their negotiations will face. In AIC’s view, the policy recommendations offered by the think tanks and ad hoc committees mentioned above are unrealistic and thus unpractical. They are based on a mistaken view of Iran and the regime, propose options for the US while ignoring the Iranian side, and reflect the views of a select group of foreign policy technocrats while excluding input from the general public and other key participants.

The Iranian Challenge

Iran poses the most daunting foreign policy challenge for the Bush Administration. The President has said he is determined to halt Iran’s nuclear ambitions, support for terrorism, and opposition to a peace settlement in the Middle East. He has also assured the Iranian people that the US is on their side as they seek liberty and freedom from the Islamic theocracy. These pronouncements are indicative of two American concerns: that the Islamic regime will not implode any time soon as some have predicted and Washington has hoped, and that its military-strategic power is growing while it remains an Islamic theocracy unfriendly to the US. Implied in the President’s words is also the fact that American concern has shifted from Tehran’s behavior to the regime itself. In the wake of the June 2005 presidential elections in Iran, this policy shift was solidly pursued by the US, leading to a policy of regime change with a minor proviso for regime reform.

The American concern about Iran’s power and its theocracy, namely the Iranian regime, is understandable. The Islamic Republic of Iran is hostile to the US and its protégé, Israel, and it is building closer relations with America’s future rivals for global leadership, particularly China, the Russian Federation, and India. From an American perspective, this easterly strategic orientation is not an acceptable position or ideology for Iran to assume in international relations given that Tehran can and intends to build nuclear bombs (even

give them to Islamic terrorists), has huge oil and gas reserves, and benefits from a significant geo-political environment. Thus, Iran must understand that the US' problem with it is larger than the sum of American concerns with Tehran's behavior. This larger challenge is what Iran needs to address if it were to normalize relations with the US.

From an American perspective, the problem with Iran's power and position can be addressed in three ways: either by developing a partnership with that power, reducing it to a non-threatening size, or by changing the regime. It appears that the Bush Administration sees no chance of building a partnership with the regime, largely because of its animosity toward Israel and its theocratic state system, whose legitimacy the US has yet to recognize. That leaves the power reduction or regime change as the only two options. Thus, the immediate challenge facing the US is to prevent Iran from going nuclear. However, the nuclear issue, while important in itself, is also a pretext for the US to enter into a wider confrontation with Iran. Tehran is rightly convinced that the US ultimately wants to change the Islamic regime, and with that pretext in mind, it is hesitant to give up its nuclear programs.

Tehran certainly considers its nuclear programs as a prestigious and scientific undertaking as well as a future defensive shield against foreign threat, considering the markedly different ways in which America has treated Iraq and North Korea. While such thinking on the part of Tehran, given its theocratic regime, should concern the US and Israel, among others, the threat posed by Iran is surely overblown in comparison to other nuclear threats that are being ignored or relegated to a lesser status. The major nuclear states continue to amass their stockpiles of nuclear bombs, and massive amount of nuclear materials remain unprotected and unaccounted within the former states of the USSR. Meanwhile, India, Pakistan and Israel remain outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and continue to build up their nuclear arsenal with complete lack of transparency. In our dynamic world, friends and enemies do not always remain the same. Today's friend could be tomorrow's enemy and vice-versa.

The view of Iran as a nuclear threat also ignores history and fact. Specifically, the nuclear state with closest link to terrorism is Pakistan, not Iran; even if Iran were to successfully develop a "second strike" nuclear capability, it would only use it defensively. In the last two hundred years or so, Iran has not initiated a single regional conflict. The only state toward which Iran remains hostile is Israel but, as the history demonstrates, much of the anger Iran directs toward Israel is rhetorical, some in response to Israeli rhetoric and others initiated by Tehran for domestic consumption. True, Iran is an authoritarian state but when was the last time an undemocratic state used a nuclear bomb against another state? The fear of regime collapse or change, even if that were to occur in Iran in the foreseeable future, and the consequent danger of nuclear materials falling into the wrong hands, is also overblown. Notably, regime collapse or change in the former USSR and in Pakistan has not led to nuclear disasters.

While prestige, science and defense are critical factors in Iran's decision to go nuclear, the country also needs to develop an alternative energy source despite its huge oil and gas reserves. Given Iran's climate and natural resources, nuclear energy may indeed be the

best possible alternative. The argument that Iran does not need nuclear energy because of its huge oil and gas reserves is contrary to the findings of many Iran energy watchers. Most of Iran's natural gas is used for heating and gasification of the obsolete oil wells. Iranian oil is also consumed at a rate far above its production growth rate, leaving increasingly less crude oil for export. By 2025, Iran's population will surpass 100 million. Unless energy prices in Iran rise to the international level, a politically suicidal move for any regime, Iran could indeed become a net importer of oil products. Meanwhile, US sanctions have crippled Iran's ability to increase oil production at an appropriate rate. Oil export accounts for over 80 percent of Iran's foreign exchange earnings and Iran has an increasingly larger bill to pay for its required imports, including food and gasoline.

EU Dependency and US Public Diplomacy

The fact that Iran's nuclear issue is primarily used as a pretext by the Bush Administration to widen its conflict with the Islamic regime is also reflected in Washington's approach to the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the EU Trio. It should surprise no one that the Administration did not want to join the negotiations until the Europeans accepted the American position that Iran permanently halts uranium enrichment, a demand which the US anticipates Tehran would not accept unless forced. This was, indeed, what the Europeans told President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice when they met their counterparts in Europe in the beginning of the negotiations between the Trio and Tehran in late 2003. The Trio told their American visitors that the negotiations with Iran would fail even if the US were to join, because Iran would not accept the EU-US condition. In that eventuality, the blame would fall upon the US if it refused to join the negotiations; otherwise, the Iranians would be blamed, in which case condemning Iran before the UN Security Council would be easier.

In accepting the US conditions, the EU Trio has surprised and dismayed Iran. According to sources in Tehran and New York, before the Foreign Ministers of the EU Trio flew to Tehran to begin nuclear negotiations in 2003, the Iranian authorities told them that Iran had two conditions. First, that the Trio would not ask Iran to forego uranium enrichment; and second, that the Trio would support Iran in case the US wanted to take it before the UN Security Council for "violating" the NPT. Both conditions, I am told, were accepted based on Iran's promise to come clean about its nuclear programs. The Europeans even promised to help establish a direct dialogue between Iran and the US. It was based on this understanding that they signed the October 2004 agreement in Tehran, whereby Iran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment, resolve all questions about its nuclear programs, and allow the IAEA to conduct surprise inspections of Iran's nuclear sites. Significantly, President Bush welcomed the agreement as "a very positive development."

Those same sources also state that as former British Foreign Minister Jack Straw boarded the plane for Tehran, former Secretary of State Colin Powell called upon him to clarify the US position, namely that it would not settle for anything less than a full and permanent halt to all Iranian uranium enrichment activities. The week before the Trio left

for Iran, Prime Minister Tony Blair of the UK visited and consulted with President Bush on the forthcoming negotiations with Iran and confirmed that all American concerns would be addressed. The Americans knew that the Europeans would eventually adopt the American position. The Iranian negotiators should also have known that the EU was either unwilling or incapable of handling a major international crisis independently of the US. In recent years, they had both the Bosnian and the Iraqi crises for reference. The EU dependence on the US when engaging in major international crises has a foundation in their economic, political, and military relations.

To cover up its dependent position, the EU now accuses Iran of negotiating in bad faith. The IAEA disagrees, though it faults Iran for the lack of transparency in intentions and certain information or actions. The Agency has found no evidence that Iran is intending to build nuclear bombs and is reluctant to declare Iran in violation of the NPT. While Iran had concealed its enrichment programs prior to negotiations with the Trio, it has since given detailed report of its nuclear activities and has allowed full inspections of all its suspected and declared sites. Iran has also signed the Agency's Additional Protocol for non-proliferation, allowing it unannounced site visits. Its ratification by the Iranian Parliament was made a precondition to the successful conclusion of Iran-EU negotiations.

The Bush administration's decision to join the EU Trio in supporting limited economic incentives for Iran to permanently halt uranium enrichment was and is designed with two purposes in mind: first, to change the spirit of the NPT without renegotiating it; and second, to win a public relations coup against Iran that would allow for the use of force if that were required. In 2002, President George W. Bush suggested that "rogue" states should not be allowed to enrich uranium even for peaceful purposes, although the NPT currently gives them that right. That idea, which did not meet with the approval of the non-Western members of the NPT during the UN 2005 Review Conference, was subsequently implemented when the EU Trio reversed its position and accepted the American argument against Iran, a signatory to the NPT.

The US' public relations ploy to sway public opinion toward the US position has been clearly articulated by President Bush and Secretary of State Rice. Referring to the US-EU joint carrot-and-stick Iran strategy, the Secretary of State told Reuters that, "This is about unifying the international community so that it's Iranians who are isolated, not the United States." And in President Bush's words, as quoted in the *New York Times*, "We are working with our friends to make sure not only the world hears that but that the negotiating strategy achieves the objective of pointing out where guilt needs to be, as well as achieving the objective of no nuclear weapons." The Bush administration has come under extreme pressure from domestic and international sources to give full diplomacy a chance before resorting to military means as a last option.

Unrealistic US Options

Thus, when President Bush says "all options" remain open, he signals that he is not contemplating serious diplomacy. The remaining options include UN-sponsored

sanctions, regime change or reform, and a war, total or surgical, by the US or Israel. Multilateral sanctions, as the first phase of a “planned” confrontation, can weaken Iran only if they were to include embargos against Iranian oil for a protracted period. The US can hardly convince Europe, Japan, or China to accept such sanctions, as they all depend heavily on Iranian oil. Nor will Russia want to sacrifice its lucrative business with Tehran, as it expects to build several more nuclear plants for Iran. Besides, Iran has significant foreign exchange reserves and is not as dependent on oil today as it was in the past. Iran’s non-oil trade with the EU is growing, and becoming increasingly more important than its oil trade with the European bloc.

Surgical military operations, parallel with or subsequent to sanctions, can inflict heavy damage on Iran. However, no matter how long they are sustained, such attacks can hardly dismantle all of Iran’s nuclear or military infrastructures, which are dispersed over its large and complicated geography. Besides, if Iran were building nuclear bombs, it certainly would be doing so in places as yet uncovered. Surgical strikes would also increase domestic and international support for the regime, particularly if the use of force were to occur before UN-sponsored sanctions and diplomacy have been given an opportunity to succeed. Surgical strikes would also make Iran leave the NPT and would strengthen Tehran’s resolve to build bombs quickly, actions that the religious right is currently advocating.

The futility of surgical strikes and UN-sponsored sanctions, if such sanctions were possible, is obvious: They will not resolve the Iranian power problem, will not lead to regime change, and will not help Iranians build a democracy. They will surely inflict heavy damage upon Iran, and increase regional tensions, as regional states and non-state actors are forced to take sides. Iran can also be expected to respond to any military attack, particularly if Israelis are involved, leading to further regional instability. If the US were to find sanctions and surgical strikes ineffective, it might adopt an explicit policy of regime change, which the pro-war Iranian opposition in exile and the American neoconservatives support.

Can the US change the Iranian regime? Three possible paths exist to regime change in Iran: an internal military coup, a US military invasion, and a takeover by the opposition. None of these approaches will work in the current Iranian environment even if the US were to use them in combination with sanctions and surgical strikes. The first is a non-starter. Americans and the opposition groups have not been able to cultivate trusted friends among the high ranks of the military, the regime has established a tight grip over them after a few attempted coups in the early 1980s, and the Iranian generals are not as popular with the people and are less ambitious than their Pakistani and Turkish counterparts.

An invasion of Iran, if it were to happen, would only occur as a follow up to surgical strikes, is feasible and would reduce Iran’s military power in the short term. The regime itself, however, would certainly survive the invasion, even if it sustains enormous casualties. The invasion would also impose unbearable costs and casualty upon the US. The Islamic regime has over a million men and women under arms and can mobilize

another million easily. These forces include devoted Moslems who are fiercely loyal to the regime. The Iranian territory is vast and formidable, and the Iranian population is 70 million strong and is generally nationalistic and patriotic. American forces can hardly march into Tehran under such conditions, and as long as the regime controls Tehran, it will last.

The American use of the Iranian pro-war opposition for an invasion would not help either, as they are small in size and unpopular with the Iranian people. Autonomy-seeking or separatist forces among the ethnic communities (Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, and Azeris) are also weak, and most regional states will not offer meaningful support to the US because they befriend Iran or fear a possible retaliation from Iran. The Administration should also not count upon the Iranian people to rise up against the regime in the middle of a war waged against them. Save for a small fraction, they dislike war and revolution and would unite in the face of outside threats. Any American invasion would surely produce an anti-American backlash among a potentially friendly Iranian population.

The regime would also unleash its Islamic supporters in the region against the US and Israel. At home, it would most likely impose a military government on the country and martial law in Tehran. The younger generation, which has been moving away from radical Islam, could be agitated using an Islamic or fascistic ideology and organized for war actions with far-reaching regional consequences. The attack would also strengthen the regime's resolve to build nuclear bombs. As a result of the security-military conditions, any reform or human rights movement would be considered contrary to Iran's national security and would be forcefully crushed. The Iranian bombs would become a reality before an Iranian democracy.

Alternatively, the US can also provide the exiled opposition with material and logistical support to change the regime in Tehran. The royalists, led by Reza Pahlavi, the son of the deposed Shah, used to be a favorite of the Fox News Channel and the Israeli lobby groups. Now many in the neoconservative movement, and a recent Iran Policy Committee, are lobbying to enlist the Iranian armed resistance group nicknamed MEK to destabilize Tehran. This group, which is considered a "terrorist group" by the US State Department's own designation, was formerly pro-Saddam and is now under American protection in Iraq. Some members of Congress are also supporting a premature and impractical proposal by certain exile groups for a national referendum to change the Iranian constitution and, by extension, the regime. Still other allegedly informed Iranian opposition figures have called for "smart sanctions" against the leaders of the regime in the hope of forcing them into compromise with the West over the nuclear issue and democratic reforms.

For some time, the Bush administration has been assisting the exiled opposition and its California television stations to destabilize Tehran. Escalating such support will not make a qualitative difference in the ability of the exiled opposition to change the regime or even its constitution. They are small, divided, disorganized, without vision, unpopular with the Iranian people, and unfamiliar with the domestic political terrain. Worse yet, they are essentially middle class intelligentsia focused on democracy, ignorant of the

needs and aspirations of the upper and lower class Iranians. Significantly, the key domestic opposition groups and personalities do not support the exiled opposition. They prefer a homegrown democracy to an American-led regime change.

A Realistic US Option

Even though sanctions, surgical strikes, and the various other approaches to regime change, alone or in combination, will not work, the Islamic Republic has an incentive to accept a negotiated settlement with the US and the Iranian people. Regime reform and normalization of US-Iran relations are possible, and as I shall argue, they are the two sides of the same movement. Tehran is under both internal and external pressure, the regime is divided about its future direction, the reform movement is strong among the greater population, and the Iranian people both desire normal relations with the US and demand democratic change. Two parallel movements can increase the chance for a negotiated settlement: for the US to give the nuclear negotiations a real chance to succeed, and for the regime to allow its opposition to unconditionally participate in free and fair future elections.

Proponents of regime change, even those favoring reform, fear that a change of US policy in favor of engagement would effectively represent an American acceptance of the political status quo in Iran, prolonging the regime's life and destroying any hope for democracy. This is an essentially anti-American argument. Those on the political right, including the Royalists, the MEK, and other so-called pro-democracy individuals, take an instrumental view of the US, and wish to use American power to destroy the regime in Tehran just as certain exile Iraqi opposition leaders used the US military to destroy Saddam Hossein and his regime. These groups are friendly neither to American interests nor to Iranian democracy, since they disregard the exorbitant price Americans would have to pay for a military victory over Iran, and the colossal cost the Iranians would incur if the US were to invade Iran.

Those on the political left who oppose engagement or the normalization of diplomatic relations have been making an anti-American argument of their own, based upon the Stalinist dogma that "American imperialism" is anti-democratic and pro-dictatorship. They point to past US support for dictatorships, but fail to recognize the fact that in the post-Cold War period, America has done more to undermine dictators than any other world power or democratic state. The experience of the last 25 years also suggests that no nation has become democratic while lacking diplomatic relations with the US. No anti-American model of democracy can exist, for at least two reasons: first, such a model would necessarily be antagonistic to the American philosophy that America means democracy; and second, such anti-American regimes often use their stance against the US to marginalize or completely destroy democratic movements within their own countries.

While diplomatic ties with the US have often been a necessary condition for the transition from a society controlled by a dictator to a democracy, they are not sufficient on their own for this transition. Two other factors have also been influential: economic interaction and sustained pressure for democracy and human rights, or in President Bush's words,

“freedom and liberty.” Since the late 1970s, in roughly 30 authoritarian regimes where these conditions were met, societies have moved toward democracy. Examples include South Korea, Eastern Europe, Russia and South Africa. In contrast, where these conditions were not met, authoritarian regimes remained in power. Examples include Cuba and North Korea, along, of course, with Iran, where broken diplomatic ties with the US and economic sanctions have encouraged a drift towards conservatism, making these countries “depots for the tyrants,” again quoting the President.

Critics will point to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, among other states, in which these conditions have been met but in which the regimes remain authoritarian. Ironically, most these countries are either Islamic, oil-producing, or both. The truth is that the mixture of Islam, oil, and an authoritarian political culture has proven to be an immense obstacle to democratization. Reforming Islam to accept a democratic secular role, diversifying oil-based economies to increase state dependency on the population, and advancing a coalition-based political process are necessary prerequisites to democratic regime reform. Ironically, countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which have diplomatic ties with the US, have a better chance to become democratic than Iran or North Korea, which have minimal or no diplomatic relations with the US. Internal collapse or the use of foreign force against these regimes is of course possible, but neither of these options would guarantee a democratic transition.

While those focused against regime change or regime reform make essentially anti-American arguments against US-Iran engagement, the more hawkish anti-Iran groups take the view that such “appeasing” approaches would leave Iran’s growing military power unchecked, thus endangering any prospects for peace in the region. The intellectual basis for the sanctions against Tehran is the idea that a weaker Iran is a better Iran. The ultimate result of the sanctions, however, has not only been a weaker Iran but also a more aggressive and less democratic Iran. These same hawks now advocate military attacks on Iran’s nuclear and military installations. They argue that, in the absence of balancing regional forces, the destruction of Iran’s power by the US is the only option to check Iran’s regional ambitions. They conveniently ignore the nuclear states around Iran while exaggerating the threat posed by a strong Iran.

As mentioned above, Iran has not initiated any regional conflicts over the last two centuries or so even though it has been in large part ruled by non-democratic regimes. Significantly, whenever Iran has been weaker, the region surrounding it has been proportionately less stable. If the 1979 Revolution had not weakened Iran, Saddam Hussein would have not invaded Iran in 1980, a war which then created a domino effect that engulfed the region, the effects of which are still being felt. In contrast, a stronger Iran has often acted as an anchor of regional stability. A stronger, friendlier and more democratic Iran would surely be preferable to a weaker, dictatorial and inimical Iran. This being the case, then the US does not need to weaken Iran in order to make it a more responsible country. Rather, it should normalize relations with Tehran, help form a regional security system with Iran as a pivotal member, and recognize that Iran’s power needs are proportionate to its regional weight and national security requirements.

The key concept is the normalization of relations: are they possible; would they resolve US concerns about Iran's power, and would they help the democratization of Iran? My response to each of these questions is a resolute yes. Iran and the US have no demands for one another that could not be solved by negotiation, and their common interests far outweigh their differences, as illustrated by the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They also have a common interest in a stable Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea, in the independent development of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and in the fight against terrorism, radical Islam of both the Shi'a and Sunni brands, and the fundamentalist Wahabi/Salafi Islamic sects. Besides, they need one another, for Iran to support the US politically, e.g. in Iraq, and for the US to support Iran economically, particularly in the high-technology and petroleum sectors.

What the two sides lack is the political will to normalize after a series of false starts in the past that have only resulted in increased mutual distrust. The Iran-Contra fiasco comes to mind, but there have been others. Building trust and confidence is the key first step towards US-Iran engagement. In no better way can this be achieved than by a third party-mediated simultaneous announcements in Tehran and Washington that the two sides wish to normalize relations and become partners in ending terrorism, securing peace in the Middle East, fostering nuclear non-proliferation, and advancing democratic development within the region. On these and on other issues, one place to start is a broader conceptualization of common ground and divergences of opinion between the US and Iran. With the crisis in Iraq, American forces on Iran's borders, and the growing tension over Iran's nuclear programs, a strategic imperative exists for the two sides to engage in an honest dialogue.

There are elements on both sides that want to see relations normalized. Above all are the people of both nations. Polls have shown that over 85 percent of Iranians want Iran to normalize relations with Iran. A Gallup poll has shown that over 65 percent of Americans do not want a US-Iran conflict. There are also forces on both sides, however, that do not want relations to normalize. These include warmongers, ideologues, selfish regional states, and those with vested personal, organizational, group or corporate interests. These and other obstacles notwithstanding, the two governments must make normalization a top priority and make every effort to achieve it. Normalization is the only hope for a renewed American-Iranian partnership and the democratization of Iran. If Iran under various authoritarian regimes has not initiated hostilities, then a democratic Iran would surely be even more accountable and would not develop nuclear weapons, support terrorism or oppose the peace in the Middle East.

More to the point, the US should apply to Iran the approach it has successfully applied to, for example, South Korea, as opposed to the approach it has unsuccessfully applied Cuba, Iraq or even Eastern Europe. The Cuban option, sustained economic sanctions and political pressure without diplomatic relations, will not serve American interest in the strategic Middle East, with the world's largest oil and gas reserves. This is also a region of significant geo-political importance, in which Iran has always played a pivotal role. The Iraqi option for Iran, forced regime change, is even more antithetical to American interests, as we have argued above, as the situation in Iraq itself bears daily witness. Yet

the best argument against this option is that it will misuse American power against Iran and will not achieve the America's goals of a stable, friendlier, and more democratic Middle East, including Iran.

The Eastern European option of "velvet revolutions" destroying the system from within would also be unsuitable in the case of Iran. In the Eastern European countries, the one-party communist systems were autocratic and subservient to the former USSR; the regimes were thoroughly discredited and widely viewed as illegitimate; the opposition forces were avowedly pro-American; and the population existed for the most part in an information vacuum. None of these conditions hold in the case of Iran, which is above all a market economy. Significantly, in Eastern Europe, religion was in the side of the opposition while in Iran it is an arm of the theocratic state. The only viable model for the transformation of Iran is the model provided by South Korea, Taiwan, South Africa, and several dictatorships in Latin America. To neutralize the dictators, the US combined diplomatic ties with economic relations and political pressure for the rule of law, democracy, and human rights.

Unless and until the US and Iran establish diplomatic ties, Iran cannot be democratized, and to normalize relations, the two sides need to move beyond confidence building. In exchange for a guaranteed fuel supply for its nuclear power plants, Iran should suspend uranium enrichment for a given period of time and implement its agreement with Russia to transfer spent fuel abroad. To clinch the deal, the EU-US "joint carrot-and stick strategy" must offer Iran a more lucrative incentives package than selling spare airplane parts to Iran and accepting Iran as a member in the World Trade Organization. The deal must not only be big enough to entice the Iranian Government into accepting it, but also for the Iranian people to lend their full support to it and stand in opposition to the regime if it were to reject it.

Iran's national security must be guaranteed, as it lives in a dangerous neighborhood surrounded by many nuclear states. The best way to achieve this security is through a regional denuclearization scheme. It would also help if the United Nations were to promote a global moratorium on enrichment, as the world's existing stock of enriched uranium will last for decades. IAEA Director General Dr. Mohamed El Baradei supports this idea. A dialogue on Iran's national security requirements and on a regional security framework would be another logical step. These measures will help Tehran justify giving up its right to enrichment, thus maintaining its national pride. Iran will almost assuredly accept an initiative along these lines, especially if relations with the US were normalized, economic sanctions were brought to an end, and the threat of the use of force against the regime were ruled out.

Resolving the nuclear issue would also open the door for progress on many other issues. Notable among these are the issues of terrorism and democratization. These issues are inseparable from one another and from the nuclear problem, as President Bush has asserted. The challenge is thus to find the right approach to democratization. Demanding free and fair elections is the key here, and future Iranian elections will provide the best hope for a democratic Iran. While giving the negotiations on the nuclear issue every

opportunity to succeed, Americans must also pay closer attention to these elections. Specifically, the US should reject regime change and let the Iranian authorities know that it will work with them only if they allowed for genuinely competitive elections.

The opposition should follow by making the normalization of American-Iranian relations their top priority. They must also call for free elections and the formation of a coalition government that represents the interests of all the various constituents of Iranian society. They should let the regime know that they will be prepared to participate in the political processes if elections are free and fair. It will not be easy to persuade the regime to normalize relations with the US and hold free and fair elections. Even if it is unsuccessful, the call for normalization and free and fair elections by the US, the EU, and the opposition will mobilize the international community, including the UN, as well as the grassroots in Iran, generating heavy pressure on Tehran. Given the serious domestic problems and foreign threats which the Islamic Republic faces, it will sooner or later yield to such pressures and agree to hold talks for normalization with the US and to open the political arena to competition.

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