

Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam

During President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's first term, Iranian foreign policy had two key enduring components. First, Tehran sought to deal with Iran's new security dilemma brought about by the U.S. presence in both Iraq and Afghanistan after 2003. Iran responded with an "accommodating policy," which consisted of expanding cooperation after Saddam's fall with the main Arab world actors, principally Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and seeking direct talks with the United States. This included Iran's engagement in direct talks with Coalition Forces regarding the prevailing security situations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In this way, Iran hoped to avoid both a new round of rivalry with its Arab neighbors and a new security dilemma in its relations with the United States.

The second component was to seek an "alliance policy" while regionalizing the nuclear issue, in which Iran sought to tie and interweave the nuclear issue with broader regional dynamics such as Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal and the Arab-Israeli conflict. By building relationships with friendly states (e.g., Syria) and political movements (e.g., Hezbollah or Shi'ite factions in Iraq), Iran tried to deter the U.S. or Israeli military threat in the short term and to prevent the institutionalization of a U.S. role in its backyard in the long term.

The prevailing view in the United States is that Ahmadinejad's foreign policy and Iran's increasing presence in the region has been offensive, expansionist, opportunistic, and often ideological. Though Iran has occasionally taken advantage of new opportunities, these characterizations have been exaggerated in the United States. Instead, Iran's action should be perceived in a more

Kayhan Barzegar is an assistant professor of international relations at Science and Research Campus, Islamic Azad University, a senior research fellow at the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran, and a research fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. He can be reached at kayhan_barzegar@hks.harvard.edu. The author would like to thank Eskandar Sadeghi, doctoral candidate at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, for his suggestions and comments.

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Iran faced a new security dilemma brought about by the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

pragmatic light. Though Ahmadinejad may himself be an ideological and divisive figure, Iran's foreign policy strategy predates him and ought to be viewed as a wider Iranian effort to secure its geostrategic interests and national security concerns. Despite Ahmadinejad's tendencies to indulge his eccentricities, the logic of Iran's foreign policy decisionmaking process always ensures this return to pragmatism.

If the Iranian leadership's actions are perceived as offensive and expansionist, then the rational choice for the United States is to maintain robust *deterrence*. In contrast, if Iran's policies are defensive, then the rational choice for the United States is to seek *cooperation* with Iran and eventually to help integrate Iran into the regional political-security architecture. Such integration is certainly inseparable from settling the ongoing nuclear dispute and reaching a broader and much anticipated *détente* with the United States. It is essential that Washington not misinterpret Iran's actions. Misreading Iran prevented the Bush administration from pursuing engagement and cooperation. President Barack Obama must not make the same mistake. He should reexamine the current perception of Iran's regional aims and redefine Iran's place in U.S. Middle East policy.

After Iran's June 2009 presidential election, Western commentators and policymakers have speculated about divisions among the Iranian political elite, and how to exploit them to gain leverage on Iran's nuclear program and various outstanding regional disputes. Such a policy, however, will bear little fruit. Though there are of course differences of style and approach among the elite, it is clear that Iran's nuclear program has the capability to unite them, especially in the face of foreign threats of increased sanctions and military attack. What, therefore, should be the Obama administration's stance toward Ahmadinejad's second term in office?

Iran's New Security Challenges

In Ahmadinejad's first term, Iran was most concerned with the new security challenges posed by the U.S. military presence across Iran's national borders in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is, however, a historical legacy at play as well with their concomitant historical traumas. Iranians have been wary and sensitive to the presence of foreign armies along their immediate borders and incursions into Iran proper since the Qajar dynasty suffered two humiliating defeats at the hand of the Tsarist armies in the nineteenth century. History repeated itself in World

War II when Iran was carved in two by the Soviet and British armies, the MI6–Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated coup, which ousted the democratically elected government of nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, and most recently, in the era of the Islamic Republic of Iran, U.S. backing of the Ba'athist regime during its eight year (1980–1988) conflict with Iran, which is estimated to have cost as many as one million casualties.

To return to the present day, with the arrival of the Obama administration, there has been much talk of a substantive change in the U.S. approach to Iran. From the Iranian perspective, however, the long-term U.S. approach to the regional balance of power remains largely unchanged. For over half a century, U.S. policy in the Middle East, and especially in the Persian Gulf, has been to maintain a balance of power while preventing regional supremacy. As a result, the Iranian leadership perceived Obama's overtures to Syria to be a continuation of the Bush administration's policy to isolate Iran and minimize its ability to influence regional developments. Obama's tactical visits and public diplomacy in Turkey and Egypt, as well as his conciliatory pronouncements toward the broader Islamic world, were all seen as efforts to shore up regional support against Iran and weaken its ability to withstand international pressure. It is this belief that led the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to reply to Obama's Persian New Year greeting by stressing that a change in Iranian attitudes would be contingent on "genuine" and "real" changes in the U.S. position vis-à-vis Iran.¹

Although the geopolitical changes following the Iraq and Afghanistan crises place Iran at the center of the region's politics and have created various new opportunities, they are also a source of serious security challenges for Iran's national security. While the empowerment of the Shi'a and Kurdish groups in Iraq's governance have strengthened Iran's role in the region, they have simultaneously presented unprecedented challenges such as ethnic geopolitical rivalries, Sunni extremism, religious and civil war, the probability of territorial disintegration, and the spread of insecurity and instability more generally across the region. Furthermore, the ongoing tensions surrounding the issue of Iraqi federalism remain a matter of great national security concern for Iran. An Iraq consisting of smaller and weaker parts would provide a basis for the increased influence of Iran's regional rivals (e.g., Israel) in areas such as Iraq's Kurdish region—or Iran's backyard.

Challenges to political sensitivities and rivalries among regional countries have also been emerging along Iran's borders. Fear of Iraq's fading Arab identity has, for instance, prompted Saudi Arabia to be more involved in the Shi'a and Kurdish issues. Turkey is now more interested in the Shi'a and Sunni issues involved in Iraqi federalism, and Jordan and Egypt infamously warned against the creation of a "Shi'a crescent" with Iran in a leading role in the region.² Through concerns about Hezbollah's relations with Shi'a militias remain prevalent, Iraqi issues are now more

germane than ever to Lebanese domestic issues. Based on the theory of making alliances with non-Arab states in the region, Israel today is more involved in Kurdish majority areas in Iraq, and is also more concerned about Iran's increased activity in the southern Shi'a-dominated areas and their effect in the entire Persian Gulf region.³ Lastly, because of increasing transnational cooperation between al Qaeda operatives and sympathizers, Iraq and Afghanistan's issues are increasingly inextricable.

Iran's security dilemma, however, is more a consequence of a variety of U.S. policies over the last eight years. The Bush administration tried to diminish Iran's regional role by installing like-minded elites in Iraq, attempting to transform Iraq into a potential model for Iran in the hope of forging a new balance of power in the region, creating an unfriendly coalition with the region's Sunni regimes against Iran and opposing Iran's nuclear program. These policies were all perceived as attempts to redefine the region's political-security order with a minimum role for Iran in its own immediate security circle.

As a result, Iran and the United States saw each other as strategic adversaries,

each trying to gain the upper hand over one another. Actions that Washington considered as security-enhancing were regarded by Tehran as sowing the seeds of insecurity and vice-versa. Though there is hope that the Obama administration will not continue the same policies, no concrete measures have yet been taken. Consequently, Iran continues to call for U.S. troop withdrawal, and was vehemently opposed to the 2009 U.S.–Iraq Political Security Agreement, which installed U.S. troops for many years, subsequently

institutionalizing the U.S. role in Iran's political-security backyard. Obama's planned Iraq troop withdrawal for August 2010, however, has elicited a positive response from Tehran.

Though Iran is being receptive to the Obama administration's change of diplomatic style and greater appreciation of regional subtleties, it is still too early to think of direct U.S.–Iran relations. Furthermore, imposing additional sanctions on petroleum-based products is steadily gaining ground in Washington. The belief, however, that this will induce a fundamental change in Iranian behavior will prove to be misguided. Ahmadinejad will continue to pursue a foreign policy that aims to secure Iran's geostrategic interests and regional status in his second term, albeit tempered to accord with the Obama administration's change of style and emphasis on diplomacy. Even an improved security situation in Iraq and Afghanistan should not disguise the fact that, when and if necessary, Iran can

Foreign threats against the nuclear program have the capability to unite Iran's political elite.

assert its influence in ways that could be highly problematic for coalition forces in the months and years to come. From Iran's perspective, Iranian cooperation in the region has more often bred Western complacency and arrogance vis-à-vis Iran.

Perhaps the most glaring instance of this dynamic was after Iran—then led by reformist president Mohammad Khatami—and its allies provided considerable support to the U.S.-led coalition forces in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in its initial invasion of Afghanistan and ousting of the Taliban, only to be later denounced as a member of the infamous “axis of evil” in George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address. This not only vastly undermined the incumbent Iranian president, but proved to the more skeptical factions that cooperation with the United States would do little to ameliorate the administration's unswerving hostility toward Iran. Though Iran is fully aware that the United States is an essential part of any equation which would assure Iran's regional role, it continues to be highly suspicious of U.S. actions, despite Obama's positive rhetoric.

The Iranian leadership has reiterated time and again that a genuine change of policy by the Obama administration is necessary. This would involve changing the traditional policy of balance of power, which is itself a source of tension and potential conflict in Iran's relations with its neighbors. The Iran-Iraq War was the result of an arms race that had begun due to a similar policy. This policy has proven neither efficient nor acceptable to Iran. The region can not be secured at the expense of Iran's insecurity. Instead, Obama should advocate a policy that amounts to a balance of interests in which all actors' interests—regional or transregional—are secured. He should also challenge the existing perception in the United States that a powerful Iran will endanger U.S. regional interests.

Ahmadinejad's Second Term

Ahmadinejad's proactive foreign policy combines practicality with ideological elements, geared to securing Iran's geostrategic interests and national security. Such a policy seeks to confront challenges to Iran's security, while availing itself of opportunities opening up as a result of the regional vacuum created by the toppling of the Iraqi Ba'athist and Taliban regimes. This proactive policy will continue to hold sway and dictate the behavior of the incumbent Iranian government in Ahmadinejad's second term. Whether Iran's regional activities are ideological or pragmatic has different policy implications for the United States. Given the cultural, political, and security characteristics of its manifold sources of power, Iran's regional and foreign policies have always been driven by two factors: geopolitics and ideology.⁴

Iran's policy toward Iraq is a good example. Since March 2003, Iran's policies have been shaped by two considerations: the first stresses Iraq's territorial unity

and understands that maintaining Iraq's unity must be the prime objective of Iran's policy. As such, Iran's policy of supporting Shi'ite factions will imbalance power equations in Iraq and hence will not serve Iran's interests in the long run. From an Iranian perspective, any tendency to empower federalism in Iraq would be a prelude to greater regional instability. Such a situation, given Iran's ethnic geopolitics, would be devastating for Iran's national security.

The second consideration, which was especially at the center of Iran's policy during the Bush administration, focuses on supporting "ideological and religious" elements, stressing that Iran's support for friendly Shi'ite factions has been crucial in empowering these groups' role in Iraq's power distribution. This policy can also benefit Iran's interests to help tackle future security challenges, especially those stemming from the current U.S. presence. Rather than a long-term strategic policy, Tehran's occasional relations with hard-line Shi'ite factions, such as the al Sadr faction, are primarily tactical and short term. And these primarily exist with an eye to undermine the unilateral U.S. policy of excluding Iran from Iraqi politics.⁵

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Iran has always stated its support for the Nouri al Maliki government and the moderate factions (e.g., al Daawa and Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) in Iraq's politics because of their avowed long-term policy to improve strategic relations with Iran. Iran's successful mediation on March 30, 2008 between the al Maliki government

and Shi'ite militias in Sadr City in Baghdad was a sign of Iran's support. Iran in fact overtly supported the Iraqi government forces against the Mahdi Army and Sadr neighborhood militia, who in the past have harbored and issued hostile statements regarding Iranian influence inside Iraq.⁶ Contrary to the prevailing view in the United States and the Arab world, which often interpreted the success of al Maliki's party in Iraq's provincial elections as a challenge to Iran, such outcomes have proven to accord with Iran's interests. Because of a balanced and modest role in post-Ba'athist Iraq, Iran has and will continue to avoid new rounds of rivalry with its Arab neighbors and simultaneously seek to prevent the creation of a new security dilemma in its relations with the United States.

Iran, therefore, has applied both pragmatic and ideological instruments in regulating its policy toward Iraq. On one hand, through its support of friendly Shi'ite factions, Iran has attempted to tackle the perceived threat posed by the U.S. military in times of insecurity, beginning with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. On the other hand, by stressing the unity of Iraq, Iran has tried to foil the damaging impact of Iraq's ideological, ethnic, and sectarian divisions on Iran's

national security. In this regard, even the factor of ideology, a dynamic element of national power, has served Iran's national interests.

Iran's Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy

Iran currently views security in the region as a non-zero-sum game in which the best action for securing Iran's national interests is to advance a win-win game. Iran knows that the United States has vital interests in Iraq, as well as the region at large, and is not likely to leave the region completely. Iran also knows that the public, in both the United States and the region, will not welcome a long-term U.S. presence. From Iran's perspective, therefore, a feasible middle ground is to help the United States secure its interests without an excessive regional presence. The strategic value of this deal is to establish a new kind of balance of interests and balance of security between Iran and the United States. In this respect, Iran's previous cooperation with the United States and other regional actors in settling the Afghanistan crisis in 2001 is a vivid example.⁷

Likewise, advancing cooperation with the United States and other relevant regional actors in settling Iraq's insecurity is another sign of Iran's pragmatic inclinations. The strong willingness to proceed with direct talks with the United States on Iraq's security issues means that Iran has strategically accepted the role of the United States in Iraq. Tehran simply seeks to minimize the threat posed by the U.S. presence in the region through cooperation and engagement. In this manner, Iran has decided to advance a win-win game. Similarly, Iran has been very cautious not to engage directly in any conflict with the United States in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.⁸ Regarding the relations with other major actors in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Iran has pursued a strategy of maintaining amicable relationships mostly through reassurance and cooperation. For instance, Iran has attempted to advance regional cooperation by actively participating in regional conferences regarding the crises in Iraq and Lebanon.⁹

Yet, from a strategic point of view, Iran's geopolitical position, its sources of power, and unique political-cultural dynamics require that it take on a greater regional presence than it has in the past. Tehran's political elite views Iran's increased regional involvement as imperative, notwithstanding the numerous cosmetic changes that have accompanied the Obama administration's "reorientation" about Iran. This rationale is based on three fundamentally defensive policy assumptions:

An Insecure and Unstable Neighborhood

Living in an unstable neighborhood has been costly for Iran over the past decades. The continued instability and sectarian conflict across the western border (Iraq), failed and unstable states in the east (Afghanistan and Pakistan), transforming states in the north (Central Asia and the Caucasus), and

authoritarian and security dependant regimes in the south and Persian Gulf, each subject to political-social changes in the future, have formed the basis for Iran's insecure and unstable backyard. Such an insecure environment has the potential to spread regional rivalries, military conflict, crises, and subsequently foreign powers' presence. The revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan in recent years is a pertinent example. A major portion of Iran's political and economic stamina is being spent on tackling these varied threats in the region. The need to continuously maintain a powerful army to protect Iran's national borders is rooted in this dimension of Iran's national security demands. The Shah's regime, for instance, justified the perpetuation of a great Iranian army to tackle future military threats from the Iraqi Ba'athist regime.¹⁰

Interconnected Security

To tackle the threats emerging on its immediate borders, Iran's defense strategy has mainly focused on constructing the concept of "interconnected security," which means having an "offensive defense" or defense through active military engagement.¹¹ From the perspective of Iranian governing elites, the region's security has been seen as synonymous with Iran's security and vice versa. Iran is paying a great price for preserving regional security, without receiving appropriate gains in return. If the region's security is significant to the United States and regional states, there needs to be an

Iranian cooperation in the region has more often bred Western complacency and arrogance.

acknowledgement of the reality that Iran is an essential part of the region's security system. Iran will not continue to ensure that the region is secure at the expense of Iran's own insecurity.

By pursuing this policy, Tehran also aims to warn other states in the region of the cost of helping the United States in any possible future military operations against Iran, making it clear that such actions would result in greater insecurity for the entire region. The future of U.S.–Iran bilateral relations in the Obama era is very much dependent on the United States coming to terms with the very real cost incurred by Iran in ensuring regional stability, such as the costs of dealing with the Taliban regime, and Iran's indispensability to guaranteeing such stability, especially in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf in the coming years. It is very difficult to see how U.S.–Iran relations can proceed beyond mere rhetoric as long as the Obama administration seeks to circumvent Iran by cultivating regional rivalries in order to pressure Iran to cede ground on the nuclear and other outstanding regional issues.

Preempting Future Security Threats

Iran's geopolitical realities, ethnic politics, and cultural-religious characteristics intimately tie its national security to that of the region as a whole. To preempt future security threats, Iran reserves the right to modestly engage in the region's political and economic architecture and activities. With the acquisition of a greater role, effective responsibility, and assurances that it can preempt future threats, Iran will be able to use its political and military energy for the sake of economic and political development. Viewed in this context, establishing bilateral and mutual economic, cultural, and political-security agreements with neighboring states will lead the region toward greater stability and mutual cooperation.¹² Iran's engagement in Iraq is aimed at preempting future challenges. By supporting those political factions or groups in Iraq that are, in a remarkable break with the past, friendlier today toward Iran and unwilling to participate in an anti-Iranian coalition for the foreseeable future, Tehran has attempted to coax Baghdad into fulfilling the role of a strategic partner in the region.

Accommodating and Alliance Foreign Policy

During his first term, Ahmadinejad's foreign policy consisted of two complementary elements: first, a policy of "alliance building" and second, an "accommodating" approach to the conduct of foreign policy. Both elements have always featured prominently in the conduct of Iranian foreign policy, since each dimension has deep roots in the geostrategic position and ideology of Iran. What has differed from administration to administration is the priority given to these respective elements.

In the Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani era (1989–1997), in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran prioritized an accommodating foreign policy toward states like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This policy was continued by the Khatami administration, which formulated its foreign policy with an eye for détente and confidence-building.¹³ Iran continued to maintain its strong ties with Syria and Hezbollah but tended to lean toward mending relations in the region, which had been severely strained immediately after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Ahmadinejad, however, reversed the priorities of Iranian foreign policy. While he still sought to maintain cordial relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, he stressed the importance of Iran's regional allies, such as Syria, and friendly factions such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Unlike his predecessors, therefore, Ahmadinejad sought to tie regional grievances to Iran's broader regional role and its nuclear program.

Thus, by becoming especially vociferous on the Palestinian issue and the Israeli military assault on Lebanon in the summer of 2006, Ahmadinejad endeavored to carve out a role for Iran on a broader regional scale. Such

conflicts, which he sees as having roots in longstanding historical issues of contention and injustices, are inseparable in his mind from Western efforts to retard Iranian development by depriving it of a raft of modern technologies, most prominently civilian nuclear technology. He also believes that by speaking out on regional issues and contextualizing them vis-à-vis Iran's own embattled relationship with the West, he will improve Iran's public diplomacy and will be able to garner and engender support among the masses of a slew of Muslim majority states.

An accommodating foreign policy, however, focuses on the geopolitical factors in conducting Iran's regional policies. Accordingly, and given the geopolitical realities, Iran should only be engaged with the political-security affairs of its immediate neighbors such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf. From this perspective, too much engagement with the Arab world, which is not geostrategic or culturally related to Iran's national interests, has been

costly for Iran, wasting the country's energy and wealth.

Experience has shown that the more Iran feels threatened, the more likely it is to expand its regional presence. Though in the short term, Iran's greater regional presence will promote its deterrent power to engage potential security threats, in the long term it will bring unnecessary tension and strategic discord to Iran's relations with the region's

key players such as Saudi Arabia and the United States. Viewed from this perspective, Iran should align itself with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, maintain strategic relations with Syria, continue its support of Hezbollah as a friendly Shi'a entity in order to institutionalize its political role in Lebanese politics, and implicitly accept the two-state solution regarding Israel and Palestine.

Iran's longstanding alliance-building foreign policy lends considerable weight to both geopolitical and ideological factors, focusing more on a political-security foreign policy approach. Such a standpoint maintains that Iran's alliance with Syria is aimed more at either balancing the Israeli military threat or deterrent power to counter the perceived threats currently stemming from the U.S. military presence on its borders. The chief purpose of Iran's close relationship with Hezbollah is to obtain benefits of strategic significance for both parties,¹⁴ such as tackling the Israeli military threats and institutionalizing the Shi'a role in the region's power politics, though the two undoubtedly possess close cultural and ideological ties fostering political and moral solidarity, which inevitably play a vital role in the battle for hearts and minds.

Iran has strategically accepted the role of the United States in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Iran should take advantage of all the influence its foreign policy has managed to accrue so far. The Islamic revolution transformed Iran's marginalized position into an active regional player. Its growing potentiality and friendly political factions in the region, moreover, demand Iran's increased regional role. Iran, as a non-Arab state, has generally fewer levers of influence in the region's politics. Tehran, therefore, has reckoned it essential to take advantage of its natural attributes to counterbalance any negatives in its relations with its Arab neighbors. For example, by establishing a coalition with friendly Shi'a political factions in Iraq, Iran has been able to shift Iraq from a traditional political rival, as well as a conventional military threat, into a friendly state. This development not only alleviates the need for much of Iran's political and military stamina but provides Iran with a unique status in the Arab-dominated region.

By drawing a broader circle of security, therefore, Iran has linked its security with regional dynamics, enhancing its role to tackle the current threats emanating from its immediate security environment. This has been key to Ahmadinejad's foreign policy approach in his first term and, in all likelihood, will be continued in his second. The essential point to note is the linking of Iran's nuclear program with broader regional dynamics. In this way, his government and the Iranian political elite have sought to package together Iran's nuclear program with outstanding regional disputes and Iranian security concerns in order to afford Iran greater strategic value and bargaining power in any future negotiations.

The Comprehensive Package Deal

Negotiating on several disparate fronts is not in Iran's or the region's interests, nor will it lead to a lasting settlement. The single most effective route is to accept the aforesaid mutual areas of concern as a comprehensive package, which would afford Iran strategic parity in the course of negotiations. Only then will Iran feel confident enough to make genuine concessions and acquire the assurances it has long sought. Iran's security strategy in this context is more defensive and based on an interconnected security and concomitant domino effect: Iran's security is equivalent to regional security and Iran's insecurity will produce regional insecurity.¹⁵ Building alliances and coalitions with friendly factions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are thus aimed to support Iran's reactionary defensive foreign policy, supporting the fact that Iran's decisive engagement in the region is pragmatic in nature. Three issues will now dominate Iran's foreign policy: the nuclear issue, U.S.–Iran bilateral relations, and outstanding regional disputes.

Only the nuclear issue has the power to bring the United States to the negotiating table.

The Iranian leadership knows very well that only the nuclear issue has the power to bring the United States to the negotiating table and provide impetus for a settlement of other outstanding issues of “secondary” concern (e.g., Iranian support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad). The nuclear program serves as a point of convergence in which U.S.–Iran interests coincide and thereby has the unrivalled potential to act as

a catalyst to reconcile any outstanding issues and grievances. Unlike other issues of foreign policy over which there may be disagreement or vigorous debate, when it comes to the nuclear issue and Iran’s preservation of its independent nuclear fuel cycle, there is a strong elite consensus that runs across the political spectrum.¹⁶ Moreover, despite recent post-election controversies, the nuclear issue continues to have domestic grassroots support, and the continued potential to act as a source of legitimacy for the Ahmadinejad government in the face of foreign criticism. Today, the nuclear program is perceived as a matter of technological advancement, national pride, and solidarity that bolsters Iranian identity and status regionally and internationally. Consequently, all political parties in Iran demand the pursuit of a tough stance in talks on the nuclear program. The nuclear program, therefore, is beyond standard reformist or hard-line policy disagreements—there is only one line and that is the line of national interest.

Among elite support, the program has the backing of supreme leader Khamenei. Iran’s numerous legislative, judicial, executive, and military bodies, along with the supreme leader, have representatives at the National Security Council, which is the main body that decides the direction of Iran’s foreign policy. Despite differences that exist among all bodies and representatives, the council ensures a consensus among them. Hence, Western efforts to try to exploit apparent elite divisions in Iran—which have largely subsided in the months following the presidential election—will not be successful. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad will continue to pursue his proactive foreign policy to counter Western pressure, if Washington refuses to take genuine steps toward a substantive change in policy. The United States needs to formulate a long-term strategic perspective instead of making short-lived and fleeting gains due to a miscalculated and erroneous understanding of the significance and future of Iranian politics after its presidential election.

At present, the main controversy between Iran and the United States is who should take the first step, and what should that step should be. While the Bush administration spoke of preconditions and demanded suspending uranium enrichment, the Obama administration has spoken of negotiations without

preconditions but arguably has fallen into old patterns by setting vague and unilateral deadlines in late September 2009. Diplomacy is undoubtedly a painstaking and time-consuming process, but Iran has agreed to open its Qom facility (which is still under construction) to International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. Very quickly in the course of the October 2009 Geneva talks, Tehran has further agreed to send its declared enriched uranium to Russia for processing.¹⁷ Though Obama's reaction to the Iranian presidential election was measured, the belief that Washington can exploit apparent divisions within Iran's elite is gaining ground, as witnessed by many of the sentiments expressed in the House Foreign Affairs Committee hearings on Iran in July 2009, which tried to make sense of Iran's post-election developments.¹⁸

Such a strategy, however, will fail for several reasons. First, Ahmadinejad has the confidence and support of Khamenei, who has final authorization over policy. In fact, it would have been nearly impossible for a strong reformist candidate to proceed in forging ahead with a U.S.–Iran détente—the deeply entrenched institutional obstacles to such action would have made such a feat nearly impossible. Ahmadinejad, however, is eager to forge ahead along the path of U.S.–Iran diplomacy. The question, of course, is whether the Obama administration will continue along the diplomatic trajectory outlined by Obama in the U.S. presidential campaign and following his inauguration, or whether the administration will return to delusions of regime change in the hopes of destabilizing Iran and extracting gains from the Iranian leadership, which will prove unacceptable to all across the Iranian political spectrum.

Furthermore, regional issues cannot be isolated from the broader picture. By initiating an active foreign policy and engaging decisively in places such as Afghanistan, Gaza, Iraq, and Lebanon, Iran has been comparable to the United States, providing Iran with the opportunity to reorient the region's traditional zero-sum game (typically lose for Iran, win for the United States) to a win-win game. Regional activeness has offered Iran the opportunity to redefine its role in its security backyard, especially in the Persian Gulf and Iraq. In fact, Iran's active presence in the three rounds of direct talks with the United States on Iraq's political-security issues was the result of Iran's increased regional role.

Iran's nuclear program has certainly presented the option of direct talks. Now, the desire to hold direct talks is present on both the U.S. and Iranian sides. In Washington, Iran's increased role in the region, as well as its involvement in important global and strategic issues, has made engagement inevitable. In Tehran, having a strong and comparable stance vis-à-vis the United States on regional issues, together with Iran's self-reliance in tackling perceived U.S. military threats, has intensified internal desires to start direct talks.

If Obama, however, falls into the trap of resorting to the threats and dogmatic policies adopted by his predecessors, a historic opportunity could well be missed.

The nuclear crisis should not be seen as separate from the various regional crises.

Iraq and Afghanistan are far from stabilized and Iran could prove vital to bring lasting security to the region. Ahmadinejad, however, will not concede Iran's claim to the nuclear fuel cycle. He has staked far too much of his government's legitimacy and personal credibility on the matter. In any case, the nuclear portfolio has never been under his undisputed control. The important

question, as far as the United States is concerned, is whether the Obama administration is willing to take the courageous step of engaging in meaningful diplomacy, while resisting the temptation to bow to internal and external pressures. Continued attempts to isolate and weaken Iran will only be to the detriment of U.S. goals, which are oriented toward assuring stability, nonproliferation, and the peaceful resolution of ongoing regional conflicts.

The Endgame: What Happens Now?

Policymakers should, therefore, pay close attention to the three key issues which will define Ahmadinejad's second term and the future of U.S.-Iran relations as well as Middle East stability: Iran's defensive foreign policy, the nuclear crisis, and U.S.-Iran détente.

There is no doubt that the key to solving the Iranian puzzle and ameliorating the profound distrust between Iran and the United States lies in coming to a realistic and lasting resolution of the nuclear crisis. It is crucial because it will not only serve as the door to a potential "grand bargain," but may also serve as a vehicle to resolve regional points of contention by facilitating U.S.-Iran cooperation. From Iran's perspective, in the long term, anything less than the continued presence of the independent nuclear fuel cycle on Iranian territory is unacceptable and contrary to the broad and deep-rooted consensus of Iran's political elite. The United States' recognition of Iran as a peaceful nuclear power, in exchange for an international monitoring consortium with U.S. participation based at Iran's nuclear facilities, with rigorous and persuasive guarantees of non-militarization and nonproliferation, might be the only feasible option.

The settlement of the Iranian nuclear crisis should not be seen as separate from the various regional crises, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ongoing tensions and disputes surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict (where the role of Hezbollah is key). Settling the nuclear issue, acknowledging Iran's status as a regional power, and incorporating it into the region's security architecture would allow Iran to work in coordination with the United States, as opposed to playing

the roles of strategic adversaries, to bring greater security to the region. If the crisis is resolved and the U.S. military presence is wound down to a level at which Iran's security fears are attenuated—due to the essentially defensive character of Iranian foreign policy—Iranian and U.S. regional aims and goals could move toward coexistence instead of mutual exclusivity.

Ahmadinejad's second term will continue to be proactive, although with greater emphasis on obtaining tangible benefits. The crux of the matter is how the United States will react. If the Obama administration seeks to bring further pressure to bear on Iran in the form of another round of sanctions at the UN Security Council, Obama's promise of reorienting U.S. strategic relations with Iran will be irreparably damaged, and the Iranian leadership's pronouncements of distrust and fears of U.S. double-speak will be vindicated. Eloquence and pleasant new year greetings will prove to be far from enough, if there is any hope of breaking the deadlock. Obama has to make a choice between going for long-term stability in a region that is strategically important to the United States and the world or for short-term gains in the futile hope that such leverage will yield a win-lose outcome in which the United States will be the sole victor. The coming weeks will tell the tale.

Notes

1. Ali Akbar Dareini, "Iran Leader Rebuffs Obama Overtures," *Washington Times*, March 21, 2009 <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/mar/21/iran-leader-spurns-obama-overtures/>.
2. For an Iranian perspective on the issue of "Shi'a crescent" see Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran and the Shi'a Crescent: Myths and Realities," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* XV, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2008): 87–99.
3. See Yossi Alpher, "Stopping Iran Must be the Objective in Iraq," *Forward*, October 10, 2007, <http://www.forward.com/articles/11787/#>; Yossi Alpher, "Except That the Regime in Iran Is Here to Stay," *Forward*, February 6, 2008, <http://www.forward.com/articles/12643/>.
4. See David Menashri, "Iran's Regional Policy: Between Radicalism and Pragmatism," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (March 2007): 154–157; R. K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *The Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 550.
5. See Dilip Hiro, "Wining Iraq Without Losing to Iran," *Daily Times*, April 25, 2008, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/print.asp?page=2008\04\25\story_25-4-2008_pg3_6.
6. See Juan Cole, "Iran Supported al-Maliki against Militias: OSC; Is the Baker Plan Back? Did Iran Expel Muqtada?" *Informed Comment Blog*, April 13, 2008, <http://www.juancole.com/2008/04/iran-supported-al-maliki-against.html>; Leila Fadel, "Iranian General Played Key Role in Iraq Cease-Fire," *McClatchy Newspapers*, March 30, 2008, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/227/story/32055.html>.

7. See Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan," *The Middle East Journal* 60, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 246–247.
8. In the course of Iraqi forces' conflict with the Sadrists in Basra in March 2008, Iran mediated to settle the crisis. See Hiro, "Wining Iraq Without Losing to Iran."
9. For example, Iran has hosted and participated in most of the regional conferences at the different levels of foreign and interior ministers held on Iraq's security during 2004–2008: May and November 2004 in Sharm el-Sheikh, November 2004 and July 2005 in Tehran, August 2007 in Damascus, November 2007 in Istanbul, and April 2008 in Kuwait (See "Kuwait Conference: 20 Regional, Int'l Events but did they Bring Security, Stability to Iraq?" *Iraqi News*, April 23, 2008, <http://www.iraqinews.com/conferences/kuwait-conference-20-regional-intl-events-but-did-they-bring-security-stability-to-iraq.html?Itemid=126>). Iran also actively participated in the Doha conference held to bring a ceasefire in Lebanon in May 2008. Iran's involvement itself, however, is an issue of concern to Arab countries in the Middle East.
10. See Asaddollah Alam, *The Diaries of Alam* (Tehran: Maziyar Publication, 2003) (in Persian).
11. For more information on offensive defense, see Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven Miller, eds., "Preface," in *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, March 2005), p. xi.
12. Assertions on enhancing bilateral and mutual economic and political-security cooperation have always been initiated by Iran's officials. See for instance, Ahmadinejad's 12-article initiative presented in the Gulf Cooperation Council's 28th summit, held in December 2007 in Doha, Qatar. See "Iran Presents 12 Proposals at PGCC Summit," Payvand's Iran News, December 4, 2007, <http://www.payvand.com/news/07/dec/1029.html>. Also see the 10-article initiative presented by Hassan Rohani, former secretary of Iran's National Security Council at the World Economic Forum in Doha, Qatar in April 2007. See Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Iran unveils a Persian Gulf security plan," *Asia Times*, April 14, 2007, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/ID14Ak04.html.
13. See Kayhan Barzegar, "Détente in Khatami's Foreign Policy and its Impact on Improvement of Iran-Saudi relations," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 163–164.
14. See Mahmood Sariolghalam, "The Shia Revival: A Threat or an Opportunity," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2007): 205.
15. This defense strategy has repeatedly been asserted by Iran's high rank official such as Khamenei, Speaker of Majlis Ali Larijani, Secretary of National Security Council Saeed Jalili, and head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp [IRGC] Major General Jaffari. See "Iran's Leader Warns U.S. Against Attack," MSNBC.com, February 8, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17042605/>; "Iran: Middle East Security at Risk," CNN.com, February 8, 2007, www.cnn.com/2007/world/meast/11/22/iran.nuclear/index.html; "IRGC Commander Gen. Mohammad Ja'fari: If Attacked, Iran Will Target U.S. Forces in Neighboring Countries," MEMRI *Special Dispatch*, no. 1833, February 8, 2008, <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP183308>.
16. See Kayhan Barzegar, "The Paradox of Iran's Nuclear Consensus," *World Policy Journal* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 21–30.
17. Steven Erlanger and Mark Landler, "Iran Agrees to Send Enriched Uranium to Russia," *New York Times*, October 1 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/02/world/middleeast/02nuke.html>.

18. See "Iran: Recent Developments and Implications for U.S. Policy," Hearing of the House Foreign Relations Committee, July 22, 2009, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/0722_transcript_sadjadpour_hearing.pdf.