Playing for the Long Haul in Iran: A Dual-Track Strategy for Arms Control and Democratization

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Since the fall of the Shah’s regime in 1979, the United States has lacked a viable and coherent policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Now more than ever, the United States must develop a new grand strategy that addresses all three principal U.S. national interests in the country. U.S. policy must seek to halt the development of an Iranian nuclear bomb, to end the regime’s support of terrorist groups, and to foster democratic change in Tehran.

Each of these goals is vital, and they are also intertwined. Compared to autocracies, democracies are more transparent about their foreign policy intentions and their military capabilities. Only when Iran has a government that is truly accountable to its people and to the rule of law will we be able to achieve a permanent and verifiable halt to that country’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and its support for international terrorism. The central strategic challenge for U.S. policymakers is how to encourage democratic development in Iran in the long run, while also slowing Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons technology and reducing support for terrorist groups in the short run.

There has been little progress toward achieving any of these three objectives. After the United States invaded Iraq, many in both Tehran and Washington thought that Iran would be next. Yet there has been almost no attempt to define a new U.S. policy toward Iran. Consumed by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and divided internally, the Bush administration did not pursue any serious new initiatives to deal with Iran during its first term in office. Despite its anti-European rhetoric during the contentious debate over the Iraq war, the United States outsourced Iran

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policy to the foreign ministers of England, France, and Germany, who spearheaded an effort to reach a new nuclear agreement with Tehran. Throughout this same period, the Iranian regime's support for its clients in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian Authority has continued without interruption. Iran's allies in each of these places have now participated in elections and increased their power and influence.

Iran's decision in January 2006 to end the suspension of enrichment activities in Isfahan effectively ended EU3 (France, England, and Germany) negotiations with Tehran and launched a new debate about UN censure and sanctions. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) decision in February 2006 to refer Iran to the UN Security Council represents a serious escalation of the conflict with Iran over the nuclear issue and a victory for the Bush administration's strategy of pursuing more comprehensive sanctions against Iran. And yet, while the IAEA decision does signal a new unity between the United States and Europeans about to deal with Iran, deliberations at the UN Security Council are unlikely to lead to serious sanctions, especially if the discussion turns to any attempt to curtail Iran's oil exports. Neither Russia nor China will stand for that.

So what then? The UN discussion is useful for winning the public relations game vis-a-vis Iran, as the regime in Tehran is looking increasingly like the belligerent unilateralist—a role usually assigned to the United States. But the Bush administration's next move after a sanctions debate (even a successful one) is not clear. Even a UN-sponsored sanctions regime that would include oil—a very unlikely outcome—will not eliminate the Iranian threat.

Currently, the only comfort to be had in the failure to articulate a U.S. strategy toward Iran is that this administration is not alone. Since 1979, no U.S. administration has been able to do so. Rather, every major policy initiative, be it Carter's aborted mission to rescue the hostages or Reagan's ill-conceived plan to swap arms for hostages, has left the United States even worse off. Even after the election of reformist President Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami in 1997, President Clinton could not develop a new mode of dealing with Iran. U.S. policy has been stuck for nearly 30 years.

Today, however, the United States cannot afford merely to preserve the status
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quo. A nuclear Iran will undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), destabilize the balance of power in the region, and threaten U.S. allies. In response, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even Turkey will be tempted to launch full-scale efforts of their own to acquire nuclear weapons, sparking a nuclear arms race in the single most volatile part of the world. Furthermore, an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities could provoke major violence between U.S. friends and foes in the region. Finally, a nuclear Iran will further embolden the mullahs in Tehran to suppress pro-democratic forces inside Iran, and to challenge and subvert U.S. allies in the region. Nuclear armaments increase the chances of political survival for the Islamic Republic.

In the long term, only a democratic regime in Tehran will truly eliminate the threats Iran now poses to regional and international peace and security. Not only would a democratic regime that represents the will of the Iranian people, now overwhelmingly pro-Western and pro-democracy, have less need for nuclear weapons—it would become a U.S. strategic partner in the region. Only a democratic Iran will allow for the kind of serious, rational, and reasoned national debate—free from Iranian jingoism and cynically manufactured nationalist sentiments—that can end the current pro-nuclear frenzy stirred up by the regime and bring a permanent, verifiable halt to Iran's nuclear weapons development program. A democratic Iran would decisively reject hard-line clerical rule at home and halt state support for terrorist organizations abroad. Conversely, as the arrival of Ahmadinejad has demonstrated, a retrenchment of autocracy in the hands of militant ideologues threatens U.S. national security interests.

An effective U.S. strategy toward Iran must be based on proactive measures and policies. One consequence of the United States' past failure to develop a strategy has been that policy on Iran, particularly on the sensitive question of Iran's nuclear program, has been passive and reactive. The initiative has been delegated to Europe, which shares U.S. concerns about Iran's desire to acquire nuclear weapons but has not been willing to make the promotion of democracy a central component of Western policy toward Iran. As Richard Youngs noted in assessing the results of the EU's "critical dialogue" with Iran, "The focus on internal politics was negligible. The conditions set by the EU for upgrading relations with Iran related to the country's external actions and not democratic reform." For a truly effective effort at disarmament to succeed, therefore, the United States must play a direct role in limiting Iran's acquisition of a nuclear bomb, while the Europeans in turn must undertake a more active role in fostering Iranian democratic development. President Bush's explicit support of the plan put forth by the Russians—joint uranium enrichment between Iran and Russia, in Russia and under the latter's supervi-
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sion—is hitherto the most direct U.S. involvement in the process.

The United States must adopt a bold new policy. The dual policy we propose has the potential to disarm those opposed to democracy while helping to undermine the very foundation of the regime's anti-U.S. rhetoric.

A far-sighted, comprehensive strategy for reducing the current Iranian menace to international security must also involve the development of an alliance with those inside Iran who see the dangers of the current regime's adventurism. President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, with his reckless foreign policy initiatives abroad and his bankrupt and increasingly oppressive policies at home, has helped to create favorable conditions for the forging of such an alliance.

ARMS CONTROL: THE THREAT

Even after the IAEA seals in Isfahan and Natanz were broken and Iran resumed its enrichment activities, some analysts in the West—as well as many Russian and Chinese government officials—still cling to the illusion that Tehran is not really trying to develop a nuclear weapon, that it is only interested in using nuclear technologies for the generation of electricity. Others acknowledge that Iran may have pursued a secret nuclear weapons program in the past, but argue that it has now given up the project. Both of these perspectives are dangerously incorrect. Despite public pledges to the contrary, the mullahs who run the Islamic Republic believe that Iran has a strategic interest in acquiring the capability to build nuclear weapons. Though disguised in assertions about Iran's right to nuclear energy, the strategic thinking of the regime has been quite simple: the United States invaded Iraq because Iraq did not have nuclear weapons, and the United States has not invaded North Korea because North Korea has nuclear weapons.

Beyond deterring the United States, there is a deeper motive to the quest for nuclear weapons, having as much to do with Iran's great power identity as it does with actual security challenges. Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons capability precedes the Islamic revolution of 1979. During the height of his power in the mid-1970s, the Shah launched an ambitious, $40 billion nuclear program under his direct supervision. Iran agreed to buy 20 reactors, 8 of them from Westinghouse in the United States. By 1977, the United States—once an important source of encouragement for this program—began to grow wary of the Shah's intentions, par-

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ticularly when he began to invest heavily in all phases of mining and enriching uranium. Overt and covert ties with West Germany, France, and South Africa were the immediate cause of these concerns. Akbar Etemad, the head of the Iranian nuclear program at the time, claims that the Shah had in mind a two-track approach whereby Iran would join the Non-Proliferation Treaty, remain within all of the existing guidelines, and at the same time develop the ability to go nuclear if anyone in the neighborhood did the same. The Shah’s closest confidant, Assadollah Alam, writes categorically that the Shah wanted to develop the bomb.¹ Under the Shah, Iran began to lay extensive foundations for such a project, building research facilities and sending Iranian students to learn nuclear physics in some of the best Western universities.

It is a fallacy often promulgated by the Islamic regime that the United States went along with the Shah’s program, and that it is therefore is unfairly singling out Iran today. Documents from the last years of the Shah’s rule, however, show that the United States was using every tool at its disposal in the late 1970s to force the curtailment of Iran’s ambitious nuclear program and eliminate the program’s military component.² Furthermore, faulty designs in the German reactors gave rise to increasing concern over the safety of the Iranian program, particularly in light of the fact that many were to be built on highly active fault lines.³

Iran’s nuclear program came to a screeching halt with the 1979 revolution. Iran’s new leaders claimed that, under the Shah, Iran had been forced to buy “nuclear junk” and invest in programs for which the country had no need. However, the war with Iraq (1980–88), during which the world was silent in the face of Saddam Hussein’s repeated use of chemical weapons—as well as evidence of Iraqi and Pakistani intentions to develop nuclear arms—convinced the mullahs that their survival depended on entrance to the nuclear club. In the early days of this new policy, Tehran officials such as president Hashemi Rafsanjani openly talked of developing an “Islamic bomb.” Not surprisingly, their program began to attract the world’s attention. As the mullahs followed events in Iraq and in North Korea, they became convinced of the following: To avoid the fate of Saddam, they had to quickly develop nuclear capabilities. They were convinced that a nuclear bomb would, in the words of the Ayatollah Khamenei, “get them the North Korea and not the Saddam treatment.” In other words, nuclear armaments would deter the United States from attacking Iran. And to avoid another Osirak, at which the Israeli air force took out Iraq’s nascent nuclear program in 1981, they had to hide their nuclear sites and disperse them around the country, even to the point of placing them in highly populated areas.

The mullahs’ true intentions were gradually exposed as the extent of their
covert nuclear development activities and their ties to A.Q. Khan's black market in nuclear materials became known. According to recent talk by Mr. Rowhani, Iran's chief negotiator during the Khatami years, Libya's change of nuclear policy and their decision to tell the U.S. government all they knew revealed details about Iran's ties to the Khan network. Recent reports about the discovery of an Iranian official's laptop containing incriminating evidence of official interest in nuclear bomb designs, and about a CIA operation that led the Iranians to purchase a faulty nuclear design from a Russian émigré scientist have added credence to the view that Tehran is pursuing nuclear arms. The regime's reaction to these discoveries has been varied. Iranian president Khatami admitted candidly on 9 February 2003 that his government was building facilities that would enable Iran to produce its own highly enriched uranium to fuel the Russian-built nuclear reactor in Bushehr—highly enriched uranium that would allow Iran to produce nuclear weapons in short order. When confronted with allegations about the nuclear program, regime spokesmen revert to generalities about Islam's prohibition of weapons of mass destruction. However, on rare occasions, elements in the government make off-the-cuff comments about Iran's right to nuclear arms.

In the wake of these revelations, the Tehran government decided on a two-pronged policy. Internationally, it aimed to exploit tensions between the United States and the European Union on the one hand, and between the United States and Russia and China on the other. This would allow the regime leadership to buy time for themselves and, in their own words, allow them "to isolate the United States" on the global diplomatic scene. On the domestic side, the government began an astute propaganda blitzkrieg portraying the United States as the sole government trying to deprive Iran of its sovereign and legal right to a nuclear program, and themselves as the champions of Iran's national interests. The very same Islamic regime that disparaged "nationalism" and "popular sovereignty" as concepts concocted by the colonialists to undermine and divide Islamic solidarity has become the champion of Iranian nationalism and popular sovereignty. But the election of Ahmadinejad, with his irresponsible rhetoric about wiping Israel off the map, about sharing nuclear technology with other Muslims, and about denying the Holocaust, has finally turned the tables on the Islamic regime. Europe and the United States are now united around more or less the same policy. Russia is trying to broker a face-saving deal for the regime while often siding with the West on the necessity of stopping Iran from going nuclear. China, having just signed a $100 billion oil deal with Iran, continues to sit on the fence while declaring its desire to keep Iran from acquiring the bomb.

Iranian officials have repeatedly made it clear that they will no longer accept
any “suspension” of enrichment activities and insist on Iran’s right to a complete fuel cycle. To date, Iran’s government has refused to commit to dismantling its enrichment program and its heavy water reactor. After their agreement with England, France, and Germany, Iranian officials again announced to the public that “the heart of the agreement” is Europe’s consent to Iran’s right and “existing ability” to develop the “full fuel cycle” for the reactors being built in Iran. If the Islamic Republic is allowed to develop its own capacity for uranium enrichment, plutonium reprocessing, or both, it must be assumed that Iran would then use this control over the fuel cycle (as did Pakistan and India) to build nuclear weapons. Recent decisions to restart Isfahan and Natanz have simply put into practice what the regime preaches in its rhetoric.

Iran’s highly developed ballistic missile program adds corroborating evidence regarding Tehran’s nuclear weapons intentions. Each new generation of the Shahab missile has had a longer-range capability than the previous one. These ballistic missiles, however, lack the capacity for precise targeting necessary to make them effective with conventional warheads. They become lethal weapons only if armed with a nuclear, chemical, or biological payload. In March 2005, Ukraine’s new, democratically elected government headed by Viktor Yuschenko released information about the previous regime’s secret sale of two dozen nuclear-capable cruise missiles to Iran, a clear indication of Iran’s true intentions.

Iran’s attempts to develop both a nuclear weapon and vehicles capable of delivering it over long ranges pose a profound threat to U.S. national security interests, and they could deliver a strategic blow to Iran’s indigenous democratic movement. A direct nuclear attack on U.S. soil is not likely. Iran’s current leadership has neither the means nor the intent to strike the United States with a nuclear warhead (or any other kind of warhead). It knows that such an attack would bring massive retaliation. Furthermore, if the regime’s military assistance program to Hezbollah in Lebanon is any indication, Tehran’s rulers are not likely to use nuclear weapons against U.S. allies in the region or to hand over a nuclear weapon to terrorist proxies any time soon. In the near term, the threat of a nuclear Iran comes from the reaction it would spark in the region and around the world, including the emergence of a nuclear Egypt, a nuclear Saudi Arabia, a nuclear Turkey, and the effective end to the NPT. But we cannot know whether the regime might attempt to transfer a nuclear weapon to a terrorist group at some point in

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the future, especially if President Ahmadinejad continues to consolidate his power within the Iranian regime.

The mullahs ruling Iran today have another domestic motivation, often misunderstood in the West, for acquiring or developing a nuclear weapon: self-preservation at home. Like the last generation of octogenarians who ruled the Soviet Union, Iran's current leaders want nuclear weapons as a means to help them preserve their regime. Acquiring a bomb, in their view, will not only make them less susceptible to outside pressure, but also legitimize the regime as a protector of Iranian national interests.

ARMS CONTROL: FAILED PAST SOLUTIONS

If the Iranian nuclear threat is serious, the Western attempt to defuse it has not been. U.S. strategy has consisted primarily of isolation and embargo. The effect of sanctions is always difficult to measure, but, in the case of Iran, evidence indicates they have utterly failed. One way to judge their effectiveness is to ask whether the Iranian nuclear weapons program would be even more advanced had U.S. sanctions been lifted long ago. This is unlikely, since Washington would never allow U.S. companies to sell technologies to Iran that could be diverted to a nuclear weapons program. It is obvious, however, that Iran acquired nuclear technologies and materials during the era of the U.S. embargo. Sanctions have not worked because other countries have not enforced their embargoes against Tehran. Russia has continued to build the light water nuclear reactor at Bushehr for the last decade, despite numerous U.S. attempts to halt the project. European companies provided the technology and materials needed for the Natanz centrifuges that will enable the regime to enrich uranium to weapons grade. And, obviously, the sanctions regime did not prevent Iran's illegal acquisition of nuclear technologies from the A. Q. Khan network or cruise missiles from Ukrainian black marketeers.

In recognition of these failures, unnamed U.S. government officials have floated new "arms control" strategies, ranging from the crazy to the ineffectual. The boldest and most outlandish idea is military invasion. Two years ago, when the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq looked simple and successful, this idea gained some modicum of
support. To be sure, though most find the idea of an attack on Iran to be dangerous, unwise, and ill-advised, military planners continue to develop scenarios for the use of force against Iran. But this idea, untenable even before the intervention in Iraq, has no credibility today because the U.S. government has neither the military means nor the political support at home to undertake such a strategy for eliminating Iran's nuclear threat. In fact, the continued empty threat of a military attack only works to strengthen the hands of radicals like Ahmadinejad and his cabal.

A less audacious, but still dangerous idea is a surgical strike—conducted by either the United States or Israel—against Iran's most important nuclear facilities, including the enrichment complex in Natanz, the Bushehr reactor, and perhaps some other facilities in Tehran and Isfahan. Proponents of this option cite Israel's air strike against Iraq's nuclear complex at Osirak in 1981 as their model for success. A U.S. or Israeli strike will not end Iran's aspirations, but it would—so the argument goes—slow down the process and make the mullahs reconsider the costs of attempting to restart the program again.

Because Iran's facilities are spread out and located in urban areas, a preemptive military strike against Iranian nuclear installations could kill hundreds—if not thousands—of innocent Iranians and destroy ancient buildings of historical and religious importance. Isfahan is the central headquarters of Iran's nuclear program, but Isfahan is also one of Iran's most beautiful cities with many precious historic landmarks. Widespread U.S. or Israeli air attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities—and they would have to be massive and widespread to have any chance of success—would mobilize the Iranian people behind the mullahs, strengthen the regime, and undermine the considerable admiration and goodwill that Iranians now have for the United States.

A military strike against Iran would thus severely damage the vital long-term goal of U.S. policy: the democratization of Iran. Iran is the only Muslim country in the greater Middle East today in which the vast majority is pro-United States. The democratic movement inside Iran—which is currently dormant but still contains hope, conviction, and possibilities—would suffer yet another blow if military conflict erupted between the Tehran autocracy and the West, because, in a time of war, Iranians would rally around the flag much like any other patriotic people.

The Iranian government, in turn, would be compelled to muster a counterresponse. Iran has no military capacity to attack U.S. territory, but the mullahs could orchestrate terrorist attacks against Israeli and U.S. targets in Iraq while more actively destabilizing the entire region. The recent victory won in the Palestinian elections by Hamas, a recipient of an estimated $25 million a year in Iranian aid,
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has given the mullahs one more card to play on that front. Moreover, air strikes are unlikely to succeed in destroying Iran’s nuclear facilities. Some Iranian officials have put the number of nuclear sites at about three hundred. Some are buried deep underground. Others may not yet have been discovered. And even if the military operation were successful in slowing down the nuclear program, it would only induce Tehran to redouble its efforts at building a bomb and to withdraw from the NPT altogether.

Some U.S. proponents of military confrontation argue that Khaddafi’s recent decision to dismantle Libya’s nuclear weapons program means that the mere threat of military force could alter the mullahs’ thinking about nuclear weapons. This analogy is a false one. First, Libya’s investment in a nuclear program and its capacity to sustain and develop the technology were only a fraction of Iran’s. Khaddafi was never fully serious about developing nuclear capability. The mullahs in Tehran are deadly serious. Second, Khaddafi had reason to fear a U.S. military strike. Such a strike could have eliminated not only his nuclear weapons programs but also his entire armed forces and maybe even himself and his regime. Iran, on the other hand, is a much larger and more complex country, with 75 million people and a hydra-headed regime not organized around one leader and his family. Especially with U.S. forces overstretched and bogged down in Iraq, Iranian leaders no longer fear a full-scale invasion, and any other kind of strike would benefit them politically.

For the moment, instead of invasion or a surgical air strike, the Bush administration is relying on a third tool for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons: international diplomatic pressure. As discussed above, President Bush endorsed the Russian plan for producing nuclear fuel on Iran’s behalf as the last proposal to be entertained before seeking a vote of censure at the UN Security Council. Tehran does not want an embarrassing discussion about its treaty violations at the United Nations. The mullahs are eager for Iran to be considered a legitimate state by the international community.

A censure vote against Iran at the UN Security Council would be a victory for President Bush and his foreign policy team, demonstrating their capacity to forge international coalitions and to work effectively within the UN system. Yet, even then, we must anticipate obstacles and ask what our subsequent policy steps might be. First, even if the Bush administration did succeed in compelling the Security Council to censure Iran, Russia and China would still be very unlikely to support new sanctions. In addition to the Bushehr reactor, Russia has many other economic interests in Iran, not least the hope that Bushehr will be the first of many multibillion-dollar Russian contracts to build nuclear power plants in Iran.

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Rosenergoatom, the government agency responsible for building Bushehr, is both a cash-strapped, giant conglomerate and a powerful lobby within the Russian parliament and government, whose economic interests in Iran will not be easily quashed by Russian diplomats. Meanwhile, China wants and needs Iran’s oil. A recent multibillion-dollar oil and gas agreement between Iran and China gave the mullahs added insurance against the possibility of UN sanctions. Not long after the agreement was signed, China’s Foreign Ministry announced that China would veto any UN sanctions against Iran. Even the French and British may be reluctant to back sanctions that would hurt their companies. For their part, U.S. firms would not be hurt by new UN sanctions because U.S. law already prohibits most of them from doing business in Iran. More generally, if a sanctions regime endorsed by the UN is to have any meaning, it must include oil—a policy unlikely to be supported by anyone. If sanctions could not be enforced with any effectiveness after the horrific seizure of U.S. hostages by Iran in 1979, why should anyone believe that they would be successful now with the price of oil at more than $50 a barrel? Second, even if a new UN-backed sanctions regime did win approval, it would not prevent Iran from acquiring some nuclear weapons technology. Iran has already amassed the technological and theoretical know-how and instrumentation to develop a nuclear bomb. Sanctions that prohibit the export of enriched uranium would slow Iran’s efforts, but only somewhat because Iran can mine its own uranium and eventually enrich it in its own centrifuges. Finally, the economic pain of sanctions would fall on the masses, not on government elites. Broad new sanctions would thus hurt the very people we are trying to empower.

A New Strategy for Engaging Iranian Society

The only viable (albeit still risky) strategy is a new U.S. policy toward Iran that combines negotiations in the short run with a principled, long-term quest for democracy in Iran. A key element of this new approach should be negotiations with Tehran over a more comprehensive deal on the future of Iran’s nuclear program. The latest deal renegotiated by France, Germany, and Britain in November 2004 turned out to be only a temporary and ultimately ineffective solution. It provided for a temporary suspension of the Iranian uranium enrichment program in the hope that permanent suspension might be traded for generous promises of economic benefits, including entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and an end to the embargo on badly needed spare parts for Iran’s outdated military and civilian aviation. Meetings in March 2005 intended to finalize some aspects of
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the deal, however they failed to result in any concrete agreements. After the election of President Ahmadinejad and his decision to replace Iran's negotiating team with hard-liners, the European effort effectively ended.

At this critical stage, the United States must provide leadership, maintaining a coalition united behind one concrete solution to the crisis—the Russian proposal for producing Iranian fuel on Russian territory. Direct contact with Ahmadinejad would be a mistake. He needs to be isolated, not engaged. However, the Bush administration must continue to look for new opportunities to advocate the Russian proposal among other potential interlocutors within the regime, including even Ayatollah Khamenei himself.

Ironically, Ahmedinejad's irresponsible policies at home and abroad have helped create favorable conditions for the United States and try to exploit divisions within the ruling elite. On the surface, the regime in Tehran appears united in supporting Iran's more confrontational foreign policy stances. Behind the scenes, however, a fierce struggle is now underway. In one camp are Ahmedinejad, his supporters among the Revolutionary Guards and the paramilitary Basijis, and messianic fundamentalists inspired by the teachings of Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi. In the other camp are not only Iran's embattled democratic movement but a wide array of other forces that were benefiting from the status quo before Ahmedinejad came to power, including—first and foremost—the head of the Expediency Council, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Unexpectedly, Ahmedinejad has pushed hard to remove from power many experienced high and mid-level government officials, including those previously handling the nuclear negotiations, and replace them with unqualified loyalists from the security services and the Basij. Not surprisingly, these fired professionals have quietly begun to regroup in order to push back, and their efforts—strikingly—have not been checked by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Until recently, Khamenei backed Ahmedinejad in order to check the powers of Rafsanjani, but now Khamenei is gently seeking ways to reign in the new president and those spiritual zealots close to him, such as Mesbah-Yazdi, who threaten the Supreme Leader's authority.

The West, and the United States in particular, needs to try to take advantage of this divide. Above all else, the United States must use this propitious moment to further isolate and marginalize Ahmedinejad and his cabal and hold them responsible for the current crisis. Those that call for constructive engagement with Iran's
current president are wrong. Such overtures will affirm to Ahmedinejad and the people of Iran that confrontational policies reap rewards. Instead, the United States must emphasize a willingness to engage with more rational leaders in trying to forge a deal based on the Russian proposal.

In parallel, the United States must do all that it can to stimulate serious discussion within Iranian society about that country’s real security interests. To date, the regime has monopolized the discussion, and the strategic thinking of the regime has been guided by the assumption that the United States will invade antagonists that lack nuclear weapons, but not ones that have them. The flaws in this logic must be exposed. In a major public address, President Bush should pledge that the United States will never attack a non-nuclear Iran and that it is precisely the process of acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities that increases, not decreases, the likelihood of some kind of military confrontation. Western leaders should remind Iranian society that a nuclear Iran would also trigger a nuclear arms race in the region. And with reference to the trillions wasted by the United States and the Soviet Union during the cold war, Iranians also should be reminded of the huge economic costs of a nuclear arms race. Through international conferences, websites, and radio programming, Western experts must be encouraged to engage in more sophisticated debates about the safety and environmental risks, and the technological challenges of developing nuclear technologies. Western leaders, particularly President Bush, need to articulate policies and make arguments that will strengthen an Iranian political coalition against nuclear weapons. The birth of an anti-nuclear movement inside Iran could also help to jump-start the democratic movement. (Remember the role that nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov played in jump-starting the Soviet Union’s democratic movement.)

Third, President Bush should endorse the idea of creating a regional security organization in the greater Middle East that would include Iran, akin to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, now called the OSCE). Such an organization could begin to provide security guarantees between states in the region as well as those outside of the region with major security stakes. The Soviet Union and its satellite regimes were members of the CSCE in Europe at the time of its creation. The security guarantees codified by the CSCE helped to defuse tensions between states in Europe, while the human rights guarantees codified in the CSCE founding charter—the so-called “basket three” items—eventually inspired human rights groups in communist countries to pressure their governments for change. An international organization with similar features in the Middle East might play a similar role. A more secure Iran would create more permissive conditions for the reemergence of a pro-Western, peaceful, democratic movement inside
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the country. The alternative, an increased specter of armed conflict with the United States, only helps Ahmedinejad consolidate his power.

A SERIOUS APPROACH TO THE NPT

After so many years of habitual lying about their secret nuclear program, the mullahs cannot be trusted to abide by their promises. If, as they claim, the purpose of the program is peaceful, then they have nothing to lose by accepting the Russian proposal. If the proposal is accepted, however, the United States can endorse it only if new measures are adopted by Tehran to enhance transparency. Iran must allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor all these actions much more closely and comprehensively, even on short notice. Past efforts by the IAEA to confirm Iran’s compliance with NPT guidelines have exposed “many breaches of its obligations.”14 The West, in turn, must give the IAEA the necessary new resources to enable a more thorough and probing monitoring operation in Iran. (This would put in place technology to monitor reactors and other nuclear facilities around the clock and in real time, analyze the data that have already been collected, and make them available to the proper international bodies.) Iran must not only pledge to give up its aspirations for generating highly enriched uranium, it must allow the international community to verify that pledge.

Iran should not be singled out as the only signatory of the NPT forbidden to develop uranium enrichment (or plutonium reprocessing) capacities. Instead, all NPT signatories should amend the old treaty to ban any new production of highly enriched uranium or plutonium. Of course, countries in need of enriched uranium to develop nuclear power will resist this new amendment, which would yet again constrain their freedom to maneuver while offering no commensurate constraints on the suppliers. But the NPT does not offer any non-nuclear country the right to nuclear power or enriched uranium. And if a country such as Iran is proved to be in violation of the treaty, then any other benefits provided by the treaty should be revoked. The amended or newly interpreted treaty should clearly stipulate that, if any country violates provisions of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, it loses its right to nuclear fuel even for energy generation.

At the same time, U.S. officials cannot compel Iran or the rest of the world to take a bigger step towards nonproliferation if the United States does not demonstrate some deeper commitment to the principles of the original treaty. Forgoing development of a new generation of nuclear weapons and accelerating the dismantling of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons would send a strong and credible signal about U.S. commitment to de-nuclearization. A new treaty that defines rules for
counting warheads, specifies a timetable for dismantlement, includes robust verification procedures, makes cuts permanent, and does not allow demobilized weapons to be put in storage (as is now the practice under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) would send a message to the world that the United States is serious about meeting its obligations as specified in Article 6 of the NPT.

Similarly, the United States and Russia should sign a new bilateral agreement that constrains the development of battlefield nuclear weapons (which might make the use of nuclear weapons more likely). In its 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, U.S. officials expressed a desire to develop low-yield, earth-penetrating nuclear weapons as a more effective weapon for destroying bunkers. Thankfully, the U.S. Congress cut funds for this research in 2004, but the desire within the Bush administration to revive the program remains. Russian strategic doctrine continues to emphasize the utility of battlefield nuclear weapons as well. In addition, President Putin announced in February 2004 his desire to deploy a new generation of strategic ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads. These efforts are unnecessary. In particular, neither the United States nor Russia needs to develop “mini-nukes” or bunker-busting nuclear weapons because the deployment of such systems would increase, however slightly, the probability of using nuclear weapons. Instead, Russian and U.S. officials should pledge to devise military strategies that do not rely on nuclear weapons. Only after U.S. and Russian officials commit to reducing the role of nuclear weapons in their own defense plans will other countries take a similar approach. As Senator Sam Nunn forcefully argued, “If the United States and Russia de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in our security it would immediately reduce the dangers we pose to each other; it would give us more standing to encourage other nations to dismiss the nuclear option—nations like Iran and North Korea. And it would rally the world to take essential steps in preventing catastrophic terrorism—not only in the nuclear arena, but also the biological and chemical.”

To demonstrate a commitment to curtailing nuclear weapons development, officials might also choose to negotiate for the necessary changes that would allow the United States to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Ignoring this important international treaty sends the wrong message about the U.S. commitment to nonproliferation. Russia and the United States must also get serious about reducing existing nonstrategic nuclear weapons and making more verifiable the safe storage of these weapons, including the safe storage of the highly enriched uranium needed to make them. As a first gesture of its commitment to lessen reliance on these kinds of weapons, the United States should remove all nonstrategic nuclear warheads from Europe. If we want Iran to honor its NPT obligations,
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then we must show more commitment to our own treaty commitments.

THE BENEFITS OF BREAKDOWN

If this new framework for monitoring and halting Iran's nuclear program breaks down, then the international community will be more receptive to a tougher policy on Iran. The United States will be in a far better position to implement its approach, combining tough measures on the nuclear issue with conciliatory measures in other areas. In Iran, the breakdown of the agreement and the sense of international isolation that would follow might also bring about a more sober assessment of the costs of a nuclear program on the part of the Iranian people.

In the meantime, the United States can catalyze this eventual process of rethinking by promoting independent, scholarly, and impartial studies that show the real economic, political, and military costs of a nuclear weapons program, as well as the real and dubious contributions that a nuclear bomb would make to Iran's security. The serious safety problems associated with Iran's nuclear reactor designs must also be conveyed to the Iranian public. International broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts must convey to the Iranian people that the inevitable consequence of Iran's "going nuclear" will be to entrench a repressive and corrupt regime that they detest. A candid national debate is sure to strip away the current widespread public support for Iran's nuclear program and separate the people from the regime on this issue.

THE NECESSITY OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

Even under the strictest inspections regime, the Iranian government will very likely divert enriched uranium from peaceful to military purposes, develop its own uranium mines, and continue--albeit at a slower pace—to develop a nuclear bomb. Acceptance of the Russian proposal would not stop such aspirations. The mullahs have repeatedly lied about the extent of their nuclear program, making it foolish for anyone to believe that they would not seek to clandestinely subvert any new agreement. Efforts at arms control outlined here only buy time. In the long run, the best hope by far of ending the danger of an Iranian nuclear weapons program, once and for all, is the emergence of a truly democratic and transparent government in Iran.

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Reformers in Remission

Just a few years ago, prospects for a democratic renewal movement in Iran seemed were blossoming. When Saddam's regime collapsed; when the United States seemed to have won a stunning and easy victory in Iraq; when there were close to two hundred thousand U.S. soldiers, fresh from victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, surrounding Iran; and when world public opinion was becoming increasingly concerned about Iranian breaches of human rights, the Islamic regime grew timid and even more bereft of legitimacy and hope. The economy was in shambles, and the youth were deeply disgruntled and increasingly active in the movement for democratic reform.

The pendulum swung quickly. The insurgency in Iraq grew, the Islamic regime succeeded in sending hordes of its political, intelligence, and security agents across the border into Iraq, the price of oil shot above 60 dollars a barrel, China grew thirstier for Iranian energy, and Europe grew more anxious than ever to make a deal with Iran. All these factors combined to give the regime in Tehran a new lease on life. When their gross abuses of electoral procedure in the February 2004 parliamentary election were all but ignored by outside observers, the mullahs became more self-confident. The flawed presidential election that catapulted Ahmadinejad to power, the victory of the Shiite Islamist bloc in Iraq, and finally the recent electoral success of Hamas in Palestine have further emboldened the radical factions in Iran.

A Country Ripe for Democratization

Despite these short-term setbacks, Iran still exhibits many structural and strategic characteristics that make it conducive to, and even ripe for, democratization. In a comparative context, the state and nation of Iran are well defined in terms of territory, culture, and history. A nearly five thousand-year shared history creates a distinct and common identity for Iranians, a factor that facilitates the emergence of stable democracies. Unlike many other countries seeking to democratize or consolidate democracy, Iran is not plagued by national debates about the borders of the state. Although ethnic strife, particularly among the Iranian Kurds and the Turkish-speaking people of Iran, did emerge in the aftermath of World War II and again after the revolution, there is little indication of a serious ethnic flare-up in the near future. Nor was the country created arbitrarily a century ago by an imperial power.

With a per capita national income (in purchasing power parity dollars) greater
than $7,000, Iran is a middle-income country, with levels of wealth, education, information, and independent social organization sufficient to sustain a democracy. To be sure, a democratic Iran would face the same set of economic challenges that the current regime must tackle. Yet cross-national studies have demonstrated that countries with the level of development equal to Iran are much more likely to maintain democratic institutions after a transition than are poorer countries.¹⁴

**Increasingly Illegitimate Incumbents**

The current regime’s lack of legitimacy is also a positive factor for democratization in Iran. Dictators have a much greater likelihood of maintaining autocratic rule if they sustain either an ideology or a national and even international project that morally justifies their power. In the first years of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini championed such an ideology, which enjoyed popular support. He also pursued an ideological mission internationally, which helped to create enemies abroad and thereby popular support for defending the regime at home. The “Great Satan” (the United States) of course played a central role in Khomeini’s propaganda, but Israel, Iraq, and even—at least ostensibly—the Soviet Union also served as useful villains for rallying popular support to defend Iran’s theocracy. Khomeini’s charisma helped to develop and maintain the ideology of the revolution.

Today, however, this ideological creed offers the existing regime little or no legitimacy. The cataclysmic toll of the war with Iraq (1980–88) exhausted popular support for revolutionary ideas and the regime that propagated them. Iran’s failure to export its form of government through revolutionary means has also helped undermine popular support for the ideals of the revolution now a quarter century old. The blatant and increasing corruption of the revolutionary leaders, who advocated piety and otherworldliness but engaged in wanton greed, further undermined the legitimacy of the regime’s ideology, especially in the eyes of many youth who fought bravely in the war and returned home to discover an altogether changed reality. In 1997 and 2001, solid electoral support for Mohammad Khatami, the reformist presidential candidate, demonstrated the society’s unequivocal rejection of the regime’s ideology. Some of Khatami’s most energetic supporters came from the ranks of disgruntled, erstwhile supporters of the discredited revolution. Although Khatami has since disappointed his supporters by failing to secure enduring democratic reforms, public opinion polls show little support for those in power and mass support for ideas antithetical to those of the revolution. Moreover, the regime’s leadership itself has abandoned the cause of the revolution, much as the Soviet Communist Party officials in 1970s and 1980s simply went through the
motions of building and exporting communism while becoming increasingly cor-
rupt and devoted to the twin goals of staying in power and enriching themselves.
This is not lost on the public. During the last presidential election, every can-
didate, including Mr. Rafsanjani—who has been a pillar of the regime—ran against
the corrupt status quo. Even Ahmadinejad campaigned against the policies of the
past 16 years, positioning himself as an “outsider” who would help the poor and
fight the corrupt leaders in power.

Non-ideological autocrats who have largely squandered their popular legiti-
macy can stay in power if they produce enough economic growth to pacify or buy
off potential opposition. The so-called pragmatic mullahs look to China—where
economic liberalism travels with the elite’s continued despotic hold on power—as
a model for contemporary Iran to emulate. In reality, however, the current Iranian
rulers do not have the know-how or resources to deliver the kind of economic
prosperity that their Chinese counterparts have produced. To be sure, high oil
prices have fueled positive economic growth rates over the last several years. Non-
evertheless, the regime’s corruption and incompetence, as well as its state-dominated
crony capitalism, have created massive unemployment and widespread dissatis-
faction. The expanding middle class and especially the swelling ranks of Iranian
youth—unemployed, with no hope for the future, no ideological attachment to
the regime, and much sympathy for the United States and democracy—constitute
a seething volcano that could erupt at some point. The lower classes are being
crushed under the weight of inflation and sinking standards of living. Corruption
is now endemic in its frequency and breathtaking in its scale, dramatizing the
moral bankruptcy of the regime.

As a presidential candidate, Ahmadinejad promised to fight corruption and
help the poor. As president, he has yet to demonstrate any serious strategy for
tackling these tremendous social and economic issues. Instead, he has distracted
his electorate by promising to remove Israel from the planet and Britney Spears
from the radio. These confrontational policies abroad and draconian social policies
at home do not have deep support within Iranian society. Continued economic
woes, unpopular social policies, and disappointed expectations mean that popular
support for his “Khomeini renaissance” is shallow.

EXPLOITABLE CRACKS IN THE REGIME

An additional factor that offers hope for a regime transition is the deepening of
divisions within the ruling elite. As discussed above, there is increasing evidence
that elements of the Revolutionary Guards are demanding a bigger share of politi-
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cal power and thus of the economic spoils. The Revolutionary Guards are already a veritable economic powerhouse in the country. They bid on almost every major contract, usually making offers that cannot be refused. The intense competitive maneuvering and distrust between Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Rafsanjani are one striking manifestation of the regime’s widening cracks. Within clerical circles, increasingly more daring and public challenges have been made to the authority of the “Spiritual Leader.” Some of the clergy supported Rafsanjani’s candidacy for the June 2005 presidential election, others adamantly opposed it. The Ahmadinejad victory has only further fueled these tensions. His personal allegiance to the teachings of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi—a student fundamentalist deeply devoted to the cult of the imminent return of the messiah (Mehdi)—and his attempt to replace all top-level and most mid-level bureaucrats with his cronies have created new alliances and new factions in the regime. These divisions can create an opening for another period of political liberalization.

CIVIL SOCIETY

The presence of a vigorous and inventive, albeit constrained, civil society in Iran is another positive element for democratization. Iran’s democratic movement remains fractured and demoralized in the wake of Khatami’s lackluster record of achievement as a reformist president. The highly undemocratic parliamentary election in February 2004 and the presidential election of 2005 delivered new blows to Iran’s democrats, first because the opposition could do little to stop the gross electoral manipulation, and second because the attempts made by reformist members of parliament to protest by organizing sit-ins in the parliament met with popular apathy. The rigged results in the parliamentary election and the unexpected victory of Ahmadinejad in the presidential election further deprived the democrats of key beachheads for promoting democratic change. However, at the same time, more than 8,000 nongovernmental organizations continue to function, human rights lawyers continue to battle the state, more or less independent media outlets such as the Sharg (East) newspaper and the Khandaniha (Readables) magazine are still in business, and a new opposition force—an estimated 75,000 bloggers (one of the highest numbers anywhere in the world)—has suddenly exploded onto the political scene. The courageous efforts of dissenter Akbar Ganji have created a new democratic hero who could play a unifying and catalyzing role for another democratic movement in the future. More generally, society performs subtle acts of resistance every day: women wear their scarves higher and higher on their foreheads and dress in bright colors, students gather at home to drink alcohol and listen to

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Western music, and youth seek out a wide range of independent (and subversive) information and ideas on the Internet, radio, and television. Although the regime has declared owning satellite dishes illegal, a veritable war of nerves is being waged by nearly every Iranian who can afford a dish and has the wherewithal to hide it from the intruding gaze of the morality police. These are all palpable signs of a regime in decay.

AN INCOMPLETE RECIPE FOR REGIME CHANGE

Despite this impressive list of factors conducive to democratization, it would be wrong to conclude that the regime’s collapse is imminent. On the contrary, when compared with several countries that have experienced the demise of a semi-autocratic regime, such as Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, or Ukraine in 2004, Iran’s political condition still lacks several key ingredients.

First and foremost, when compared with these other semi-autocratic regimes, Iran’s regime has aggressively deterred reformers from seeking office. In Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic ordered the slaughter of thousands in Kosovo and in neighboring countries, actions for which he sat as a war criminal in The Hague. He also closed down radio stations, allegedly ordered the murder of an independent journalist, and arrested hundreds of student protestors. And yet he never tried to cancel elections or even remove his main opponents from the ballot, an act that the mullahs ruling Iran have brazenly turned into their “right” and implemented most forcefully during the last parliamentary election. In Ukraine, President Leonid Kuchma and his government apparently ordered the murder of an investigative journalist, periodically launched assaults against independent media, and orchestrated massive electoral fraud during the 2004 presidential election as a means to put a chosen successor in power. Yet Kuchma also allowed the election to occur and then eventually refrained from using force against the demonstrators who demanded that the actual election results be recognized. This has not been the case in Iran, where both the ruling mullahs and the Revolutionary Guards have proven their commitment to ruthless prevention of reform.

Second, when strategizing on how to bring about regime change, Iranian democrats face a greater challenge than their Ukrainian or Serbian counterparts in that they must alter the constitution significantly in order to democratize Iran. To
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varying degrees, democrats in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine either pursued or threatened to pursue extraconstitutional means to achieve democratic breakthroughs. Yet when they did so, their aim was to make sure that the formal laws embodied in existing constitutions were actually followed and no longer abused by corrupt governments. By contrast, Iran's constitution itself is not democratic. Guaranteeing its enforcement would not produce a democratic breakthrough. In particular the position of the supreme leader, the "Great Leader of the Revolution" in the parlance of Tehran, must be eliminated, as should the role of the "Guardian Council" and the "Council of Experts"—both by law dominated by the clergy. Furthermore, the existing criminal code, family law, and innumerable other statutes are all in need of radical revision if they are to become liberal and democratic. To make such changes operating from within the rules of the current system might be impossible, as the bitter experience of the last decade demonstrated. Despite having a reformist president in power and a significant number of reformist deputies in parliament, Iran's reformist movement could not democratize the current regime from within. Some kind of rupture with the existing constitutional system will therefore likely be necessary in order to bring about democracy in Iran. But the people's bitter experience with violent revolution and their recognition that, in such times, only the most ruthless and organized win the day has made them averse to the idea of another.

Third, as a consequence of playing by the current regime's rules and losing, Iran's democracy movement has been demoralized. Some activists are disenchanted with politics and the movement is in disarray. Expectations after Khatami's election in 1997 were very high, and—nearly a decade later—little has been achieved in the way of enduring political reform. This has precipitated division among Iran's democratic leaders. Some have offered harsh criticisms of Khatami and his policies. A number of activists and leaders have lost all hope and become, at least temporarily, depoliticized. Student apathy is the most disturbing symptom of this trend. No new, broad coalition has emerged to inspire and unite Iranian democrats. Nor is there much agreement about tactics or next steps. For instance, democrats were divided about whether to participate in or boycott the June 2005 presidential elections, knowing that victory was a remote possibility and that even victory—as the Khatami era showed—was unlikely to produce democratic change.

Ironically, this failure to achieve a democratic breakthrough in the 1990s may yet be a favorable condition for success in the future. For instance, in Poland in 1980–81, Solidarity organized a democratic movement against the communist regime that eventually included one out of every four people in the country. Yet even this amazingly successful democratic movement was crushed by military rule.
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in December 1981. For several years thereafter, prospects for democratization in Poland looked dim before suddenly taking a turn for the better in 1989. Likewise, Serbia's 'Together' movement staged a 100-day protest throughout the country in 1996–97 to contest falsified local elections, yet Milosevic did not fall and many considered the act a failure. Three years later, however, many of the same activists who organized Together regrouped to overthrow Milosevic. In Ukraine, the Ukraine Without Kuchma movement in 2000 failed miserably. Although not apparent at the time, this failed social movement contributed greatly to the successful mass mobilization for regime change in the fall of 2004.

It is impossible to predict when and under what conditions Iran's democratic forces might build on past experiences of success and failure, reorganize in a more effective way, and then adopt a successful strategy for toppling the current regime. Yet many of the key ingredients for such a political earthquake already exist inside Iran. A latent potential for remobilization is there. What exogenous shock might trigger a new campaign for democracy, however, remains a central question.

Prospects for a New Regime Change Policy

Could the United States provide this exogenous shock? Might a new U.S. approach to Iran help reinvigorate Iran's democratic movement? Our answer is probably not. More likely, the trigger for regime change will come from within Iran, perhaps in some domestic development that precipitates a crisis within the ruling elite, which in turn might allow for the reemergence of a formidable democratic opposition. At the same time, however, the United States could make an important contribution by helping create more favorable conditions for Iranian democratization. The United States loses nothing in trying to pursue such a strategy. Rather, it benefits—in Iran and internationally—by advancing its principles and standing behind them.

To be sure, the U.S. track record on advocating positive change in Iran has not been encouraging. Before the creation of the Islamic Republic, the United States played a direct and largely negative role in influencing regime change in the country. The Anglo-U.S.-led coup in 1953 against Iran's nationalist leader, Mohammed Mossadeq, marked the darkest moment of U.S. meddling in Iran's internal affairs. Mossadeq surely made many grave errors of his own, but the CIA operation against him—Iran's democratically elected prime minister—placed the United States on the wrong side of history in Iran for several decades. In the context of the cold war, the newly reinstalled Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi did seem to serve U.S. geopolitical interests in the short term but, ultimately, his regime led to the creation of the Islamic revolution in Iran and that event, more than any other,
has been the trigger for the rise of Islamic movements and terrorists during the past quarter century.

In fact, the current policy vacuum and the de facto prescription of “do nothing” have more merit than a strategy of military intervention, either directly or through proxies, as a means of aiding Iranian democratization. Doing no harm is better than doing massive harm to the democratic cause inside Iran. This might lead one to conclude however, that current U.S. policy is doing nothing when in fact it has, even if unwittingly, helped preserve autocracy rather than undermine it. The U.S. sanctions regime has not weakened Iran’s dictatorship. Instead, it has generated huge economic rents for the mullahs, isolated democratic forces by keeping Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) devoted to fostering democracy out of Iran, and denied Iran the economic and social ties with the world that can serve as a powerful force for change.

A Serious Engagement Policy

A serious strategy for fostering democracy in Iran must focus on one strategic objective—strengthening the forces for democratic change inside Iran. Democracy cannot be exported, but it can be imported—that is, external actors can provide goods and services requested by a local democratic movement, but only if a local group is demanding such “products.” Given the current status of state-to-state relations between the United States and Iran, U.S. tools available for achieving this objective are limited but important. They include presidential speeches in support of Iranian democracy, radio broadcasts that provide independent news analysis and information about the practice of democracy, and strengthening democratic regimes on Iran’s borders. All of these policies must be expanded. At the same time, a bolder approach to supporting Iranian democracy must consider new policies for engaging the Iranian state, which in turn will provide a more favorable international context for engaging directly with Iranian society. Dangling dollars as a boost for the democratic movement is sure to backfire, attracting—as it surely does—opportunists masquerading as Iranian democrats and allowing the mullahs to further attack all democrats as “servants” of the United States. Only a dual-track strategy of engaging the state and society (inside Iran) in parallel and simultaneously will create the conditions necessary for a genuine and comprehensive U.S. strategy of democracy promotion.

In beginning to explore the modalities of new relations with the regime in Tehran, U.S. diplomats must be absolutely transparent in their negotiations and clear about their long-term goals: fostering democracy, a genuine rule of law, and
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an open society in Iran. If at any time in the course of making these changes it
becomes clear that the Iranian democratic movement is hurt by the unfolding
developments or if the regime tries to use the new relations with the United States
to further suppress or embarrass the democratic movement, then steps should be
taken to change the dynamics of the relationship. Ironically, though, engaging the
regime may well be a necessary condition for its eventual peaceful replacement.

As this process moves forward, however, U.S. diplomats must make clear that
the change in U.S. policy is not an inducement for cooperation on nuclear issues
but another means for promoting political and economic change inside Iran. For
example, WTO membership should not be a reward for cooperation on nuclear
issues, but should instead be understood as a goal in and of itself that could indi-
rectly help the democratic movement. If Iran is to join the WTO, it will have to
dismantle all sorts of state subsidies to inefficient enterprises and so-called Bonyads,
or foundations, which provide revenues to the conservative clerics and their allies in
the bazaars. Economic liberalization inside Iran will erode the strength of those
economic groups that now profit from rents provided by the state. Chinese inves-
tors, including many Chinese expatriates, are eager to work with the Iranian re-
gime. By contrast, many U.S. investors seeking to work inside Iran are Iranian
Americans who despise the current regime. In the long run, they will wield their
economic power at the expense of the mullahs, not to their benefit. To be sure, the
Iranian regime realizes this threat and will do all that it can to thwart it. However,
some—the so-called “pragmatists”—within the current regime will be tempted to
cooperate, just as “pragmatists” in the former communist world were willing to
transform their political power into property rights.

Second, general economic sanctions on Iran must be lifted. The United States
should develop a policy of “smart sanctions” and take legal steps against the illicit
gains and activities of corrupt leaders and elites worldwide. Restrictions should
also cover the activities of the related foundations and fronts used by these
leaders. “Smart sanctions,” which will surely affect some of the most corrupt offi-
cials in the Islamic Republic, would have entirely different effects than the broad
embargo currently in force against Iran. To date, the economic blockade has hurt
the Iranian people and strengthened a parasitic class of middlemen at the expense
of a viable private sector. It has enriched a small coterie of cronies, in cahoots with
powerful mullahs who tend to belong to the most intransigent of right-wing groups

Robust development in Iran and a deepening of the
country’s economic and social integration into global
networks could act as the Trojan horse of democracy.
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(such as the Mo'talefe, a group of terrorists organized in the early 1960s who eventually killed Mansur, the Iranian prime minister). Absurdly, the current sanctions regime makes it difficult for Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi to publish her memoirs in the United States, all but impossible for Western NGOs dedicated to assisting civil society to open offices in Iran, and extremely difficult to bring Iranian democrats to U.S. conferences. The embargo also allows the regime to blame the United States for the economic problems that are in fact the direct result of the regime's gross corruption and mismanagement.

Lifting the embargo would not be a reward to the conservatives but a threat to them. An end to the embargo will end the regime's ability to blame its economic woes on the United States, reinforce a positive U.S. image to an already pro-United States Iranian populace, enable U.S. companies and organizations to engage directly with the Iranian people, and undermine the argument that the regime needs nuclear weapons to defend against threats from the United States. Most important, robust development in Iran and a deepening of the country's economic and social integration into global networks could act as the Trojan horse of democracy. It would invigorate the fledgling private sector and empower the economically squeezed middle classes, which are historically the most viable foundations for and effective advocates of democracy.

Third, the president must make a major policy speech stating that the United States stands firmly behind the idea of a democratic and sovereign Iran in which the United States does not back individuals or organizations but only the process of democracy. Such a declaration will render ineffective the regime's anti-United States rhetoric, help free Iran's genuine domestic opposition from the threat of being branded U.S. agents, and distance the U.S. government from those exiles seeking regime change but not necessarily democratic regime change.

Fourth, the United States should begin discussions to establish a U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran. Of course, such discussions would have to take place in the context of the broader diplomatic effort to halt Iran's nuclear weapons program. In addition to agreeing to new restrictions on its nuclear program, Iran would also have to renounce support for terrorism before full diplomatic relations could be restored. A joint statement condemning or "regretting" both the taking of hostages by Iran in 1979 and the removal by coup (with U.S. support) of the Mossadegh government in 1953 might also be necessary.

DIRECT DIPLOMACY

In pursuing a new relationship with the Islamic Republic, U.S. officials must in-
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as they did with the Soviet Union during the cold war—that they will engage Iranian society directly through diplomatic contacts and an active public affairs program. Limits on societal contacts cannot be permitted. Gradually, with normalized relations, U.S. mass media and NGOs could open offices in Iran, establish ties with their Iranian counterparts, and promote cultural exchanges, free flows of information, and democratic development. A U.S. ambassador in Tehran could also act as a vocal defender of Iranian human rights groups and as a symbol of the U.S. desire to engage the Iranian people and society.

A new kind of diplomatic relationship with Tehran would not be a concession to the mullahs but a step toward opening, liberalizing, and ultimately democratizing Iran. The end of the current sanctions coupled with a U.S. diplomatic presence in Tehran would allow much greater contact between U.S. and Iranian businessmen, civic leaders, academics, and elected officials committed to democratic change.

COUNTERINTUITIVE BENEFITS TO ENGAGEMENT

If our hypothesis is right and greater engagement with the outside world and the United States in particular will help precipitate the demise of the current Iranian regime, then Khomeini and Ahmadinejad would not want to enter into discussions about the normalization of relations with the United States. The truth is that they are very unlikely to do so under the current regime, as many actors in the theocratic establishment understand the potential consequences of normalization and opening for the stability of their rule. They fear what we desire. Yet, even if the Islamic Republic rejects the U.S. offer of lifting sanctions and restoring diplomatic relations, such an initiative would serve U.S. interests. The United States would win favor with its European allies for attempting constructive engagement and expose to the world the true sinister intent and intransigent nature of the Iranian regime. More important, a rejected overture from the United States might spark even greater hostility from the Iranian people toward their government and perhaps even exacerbate the tensions within the existing regime. Then the Iranian people would see who really stands in the way of steps that would expand international trade and investment and revive economic development in the country.

It is also conceivable that the more moderate forces within the regime might be tempted to talk with the United States about normalization, in part to isolate their more radical rivals, believing that they might manage a new relationship with the United States without jeopardizing their hold on power. Autocrats around the world continually miscalculate the extent of their power as well as their ability to
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control events. They frequently believe that they can manage change without losing their hold on political primacy. Sometimes they are right, sometimes they are wrong; but in the long run it is likely that they will be wrong.

In the specific case of the mullahs in Tehran, they realize that they cannot be fully included in the global economy and polity without relations with the United States. Normalization of relations might be a way for the regime (and specifically, Ayatollah Khameini) to deliver something tangible to the people, as it would take place in the context of a broader thawing of Iranian-U.S. relations, an end to the economic embargo, and probably a significant increase in foreign investment. In that case, the mullahs might see a normalization and integration package as serving their near-term need to shore up their rule. They would be wrong, but the logic of the argument might compel them to pursue such a diplomatic path.

CULTURAL CONTACTS

With or without new relations with the regime, the United States must take the initiative to dramatically increase direct exchanges between Iranians and U.S. citizens in the fields of education, culture, science, and other avenues of people-to-people and society-to-society interaction. Over the medium to long run, one of our best means to inspire and promote democratic change in Iran is the simple exposure of Iranians to various models of democratic and open society. Such educational and social exchanges proved critical in helping to foster liberalization in the former communist world and also helped to generate democratic sentiments in Iran during the era of the Shah. These exchanges have dwindled during the era of the Islamic Republic, however, and the numbers of foreign students and visitors from the Middle East and the broader Muslim world in the United States have plummeted further since 11 September 2001. Thousands of Iranian students should be studying in the United States (not only physics, but political science, law, and history), and young people from the United States should eventually be spending time at Iranian universities as well, studying the country and its language, culture, and history. Though mindful of security considerations, we need to open the doors to vigorous exchange again. In order to process the vast amounts of Iranians who desire U.S. visas, we need to increase by a factor of several times the number of U.S. consular officials available in Dubai to interview Iranian applicants—until such time, hopefully soon, that we can reestablish an embassy in Tehran and consulates in at least two or three other Iranian cities. We should also establish (for countries throughout the Middle East) a “fast-track” list of intellectual and civic leaders whose integrity and lack of hostility to the United States are well established and

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who can therefore to obtain visas quickly, rather than having to go through a frustrating and often humiliating months-long process. We cannot fully advance the United States’ interests and values in the region if we cannot engage the people within these countries who are most likely to embrace them.

Finally, the United States must do more to increase the flow of information about comparative democratic experiences into Iran. Today, Iran’s democratic movement is despondent and isolated. The more information they have about struggles in other countries, the better. Translation of key democratic texts into Persian is a must. The creation of interactive websites on democracy, explicitly focused abroad, must be expanded. Greater segments of programming on Radio Farda should be devoted to serious analytical discussions about democracy and democratization. Budgets for VOA television must be increased. With all of these vehicles of communication, there should be a special focus on constitutional issues and legitimate procedures for changing constitutions.

CONCLUSION

In the first years of his presidency, Ronald Reagan labeled the Soviet Union the “Evil Empire” and went out of his way to avoid contact with such a regime. After a few years, however (and well before Gorbachev came to power), Reagan realized that he had serious arms control issues to pursue with the Kremlin leaders and that the best way to facilitate the dissolution of the “Evil Empire” was to increase contacts between the West and the Soviet people. He pursued both objectives—arms control and non-military regime change—in parallel.

The U.S. government would do well to study this approach toward the Soviet Union and pursue a dual-track strategy, simultaneously engaging both the Iranian state and Iranian society. The United States can pursue an active strategy of fostering democratization in Iran and at the same time seek an arms control agreement with the mullahs in Tehran. In fact, paradoxical though it may seem, a more substantive agenda at the state-to-state level would create more permissive conditions for Western engagement of Iranian society. This is precisely what happened in the 1980s, when the United States offered the Soviet regime serious cooperation on strategic matters while remaining true to the United States’ democratic principles. There is no reason that the United States could not follow a similar dual-track strategy toward Iran today. Given the failures of previous policies over the last quarter century, it is hard to see how taking a chance on this new grand strategy could make the situation any worse. And perhaps most important, it is the policy that Iranian democrats want to see coming from the United States.
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In the long run, it was not arms control but democratization within the Soviet Union that made the United States safer. If the United States desires a lasting foreign policy of similar success with regard to Iran, now is the time to think big and change course as dramatically—and ultimately as successfully—as we did in dealing with the challenges presented by the Soviet empire.

NOTES


4. Alam, in his Daily Journal, refers on more than one occasion to the Shah's intention to develop the bomb. For example, in vol. 5, he writes that the Shah "is definitively thinking of getting the nuclear bomb (although he consistently denies this idea)." Assadollah Alam, Yadashthay-e Alam, vol. 5, Alinagh Ali Khan ed. (Bethesda, MD: 2003). 360. The original is in Persian, and the translation is ours.

5. In interviews with Abbas Milani, Akbar Etemad talked at great length about these ongoing tensions and the nature of negotiations. The Islamic revolution aborted these negotiations, as well as Iran's nuclear program. Akbar Etemad, interview with Abbas Milani, Paris, 11 August 2004.

6. In numerous papers, presentations, and op-ed pieces, Professor Najmeddin Meshkati, of the University of Southern California School of Engineering, has written about serious safety concerns for Iran's nuclear program. For example, Najmeddin Meshkati, "Iran's Nuclear Program," Hoover Institution Conference on Prospects for Iranian Politics (Hoover Institution, Stanford University: October 2002).


15. Of the three cases, Ukrainian democrats abided most by the constitution. Yet, even there, Yushchenko took the presidential oath of office before any state body had authorized the results of the elections, thereby giving Ukraine two presidents for a short period of time. This dual sovereignty is the definition of a revolutionary situation. Ukrainian activists also made plans to seize government office buildings, but
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Yushchenko interrupted the plans each time.

16. However, analysts and would-be promoters of democracy also miscalculate the causes and effects of policy changes. We must remain open to the possibility that engagement with Iran could strengthen the current regime, at least in the short run. Given how little has changed in Iran in the last quarter century, and the potential extraordinary payoffs of regime opening, we think this risk (and the related ones) are well worth taking.
