

How Iran Can Yet Be Tamed

Behind the scenes in Tehran, a fierce power struggle is now taking place. The West can exploit it. By Michael McFaul and Abbas Milani.

In response to Tehran's foolish decision to restart its nuclear enrichment program, the U.N. Security Council finally got serious about dealing with the Iranian threat. In early March, there were intense diplomatic negotiations between the five permanent members of the Security Council over the text of a resolution (or a presidential statement) requiring Iran to suspend its enrichment activities. Russia and China are, as expected, resisting Western pressures to issue a serious and sober threat to Tehran. To encourage Russia and China to block U.N. action, Iran has offered multibillion-dollar incentives to both countries. Failure by the Security Council to arrive at an agreement will affirm the assessment of hard-liners in Tehran that the United States is too weak to achieve its basic foreign policy objectives regarding Iran.

But then what? Passing a Security Council resolution is a necessary but far from sufficient step for addressing the threat from the Islamic republic.

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New sanctions, even if they included oil, would not undermine the Iranian regime. A more farsighted, comprehensive strategy for reducing the Iranian menace to international security must include developing an alliance with those inside Iran who also see the dangers of the regime's adventurism. Ironically, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his dangerous foreign policy initiatives abroad, combined with his bankrupt and increasingly oppressive policies at home, have helped create favorable conditions for forging such an alliance.

The strategic thinking of the regime has been simple: The United States invaded Iraq because Iraq did not have nuclear weapons; the United States has not invaded North Korea because North Korea has nuclear weapons. The flaws in this logic must be exposed.

On the surface, the regime in Tehran seems to stand together in supporting Iran's confrontational foreign policy stances. Behind the scenes, however, a fierce struggle is under way. In one camp is Ahmadinejad, his supporters in the Revolutionary Guards and the paramilitary force known as the Basijis, and messianic fundamentalists inspired by the teachings of Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi. In the other camp is not only Iran's embattled democratic movement but also an array of forces that benefited from the status quo before Ahmadinejad came to power, including the head of the Expediency Council, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Unexpectedly, Ahmadinejad has pushed hard to remove from power many experienced high- and midlevel government officials, including those previously handling the nuclear negotiations, and to replace them with unqualified loyalists from the security services and the Basijis. Not surprisingly, those fired professionals have quietly begun to regroup; significantly, their efforts have not been checked by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Until recently Khamenei had backed Ahmadinejad as a way to restrain Rafsanjani's power, but now Khamenei is gently seeking ways to rein in the new president and those spiritual zealots close to him, such as Mesbah-Yazdi, who threaten the supreme leader's authority.

If this split in the regime deepens, Ahmadinejad will not be able to rely on widespread support in Iranian society. In last year's presidential election,

Ahmadinejad ran a clever campaign as an outsider and critic of the status quo. He rallied electoral support not by promising to remove Israel from the face of the earth but by pledging to fight corruption and support the poor. In power, however, Ahmadinejad quickly undermined his anticorruption credentials by appointing his relatives to government positions; he then tried to change the subject by launching repressive policies at home and exacerbating tensions abroad. Economic woes, new restrictions on social freedoms, and disappointed expectations mean that popular support for his Khomeini renaissance is shallow.

These developments create opportunities for Western leaders well beyond U.N. votes. First, and most obviously, the United States must take advantage of the current climate to further isolate and marginalize Ahmadinejad and his cabal and hold them responsible for the crisis. Calls for constructive engagement with Iran's president are wrong; such overtures would only confirm Ahmadinejad's contention that confrontational policies reap rewards. The decision by the Iranian government to begin direct negotiations with the United States—albeit ostensibly only about Iraq—was an obvious defeat for the Ahmadinejad camp. It showed, once again, that if the United States can get Europe, Russia, Japan, and China to agree on a common policy—and all are now agreed that the regime in Tehran must not be allowed to develop the bomb and undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—the mullahs in Tehran will abandon their strident policies and try to find an accommodation with such a powerful coalition.

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Second, U.S. and European leaders must do more to stimulate a serious discussion in Iranian society about the country's security interests and articulate policies and arguments that will strengthen an Iranian political coalition against nuclear weapons. So far the Tehran regime has monopolized the discussion. Although disguised in assertions about Iran's right to nuclear energy, the strategic thinking of the regime has been simple: The United States invaded Iraq because Iraq did not have nuclear weapons; the United

States has not invaded North Korea because North Korea has nuclear weapons. 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, underscoring that the Iranians' acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities actually *increases* the likelihood of a military confrontation with the United States. Western leaders should remind Iranian society that a nuclear Iran would also trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, as Egypt and Saudi Arabia would move quickly to develop their own arsenals. As the threat of serious U.N. sanctions has increased, more and more Iranian political figures and groups have dared to speak out against the wisdom of the current policy and to question the value of a nuclear program that renders Iran a pariah nation. In a recently leaked poll (intended for use by the regime), 69 percent of Iranians said they do not consider the nuclear program a "life and death" issue for the country and only 10 percent said they believe Ahmadinejad has the ability to solve the country's problems.

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Third, President Bush should endorse the idea of creating a regional security organization in the Middle East, which would include Iran. Like the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe during the Cold War, this new organization could begin to provide security guarantees between Middle East states as well as outside the region. A more secure Iran would create better conditions for a pro-Western, peaceful, democratic movement to reemerge inside the country. The specter of armed conflict with the United States only helps Ahmadinejad consolidate his power.

Ahmadinejad's threat to external security and internal freedoms is bringing forth an opposition coalition that sees more clearly the dangers of confrontation with the West. A nimble U.S. policy—one that plots a strategy beyond the next Security Council vote—can help these forces inside Iran succeed. ■

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