

Iran's Nuclear Aspirations: East Meets West

by

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Abstract

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Iran's nuclear ambitions are rooted in the desire to be a self-sufficient nation that has regional and global respect and influence, can defend its people and interests, and can ensure the survival of the Islamic Republic. Although Iran claims to seek nuclear capability for energy production, its seeming efforts to develop a program that is oriented towards weapon production, coupled with actions to keep these efforts clandestine, drive the United States and its allies to believe that Iran is working towards manufacturing nuclear weapons. U.S. incentives and sanctions have done little in the last 12 years to halt Iranian efforts. This lack of progress demands the United States and its partners take a bolder approach towards negotiations with Iran by offering a path towards a "Grand Bargain" in which the United States would grant Iran full diplomatic and economic recognition in exchange for total compliance with international treaties regarding nuclear proliferation. Doing so is the best hope to prevent Iran from becoming the next nation with an atomic weapon.

Iran's Nuclear Aspirations: East Meets West

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet

—The Ballad of East and West by Rudyard Kipling¹

This timeless line from a poem by Rudyard Kipling provides us an enduring reminder of the cultural and political clashes that have beset politicians, leaders, and soldiers throughout the history of East – West engagement. Manifested across the ages, this discordant relationship has spanned the ancient wars between Greece and Persia, the Crusades, numerous conflicts over the last two centuries, and continues today in the form of violent extremism. While historians, academics, politicians, and of course the participants, may argue over the righteousness and true nature of these conflicts, there is little doubt that a seeming clash of cultures continues to exist between East and West. Within this framework, the United States and its allies endeavor to come to terms with an increasingly emboldened Iran and its rising nuclear aspirations.

This paper will briefly review the history of Iran's conflict with the West, to include the history of Iran's nuclear program. It will examine the factors driving Iranian nuclear proliferation, the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to prevent and contain Iran's nuclear ambitions, and posit alternatives to current U.S. nuclear non-proliferation strategy. This topic is a wicked, complex problem with a myriad of contributing factors and nuances, some of which this author, readily, did not discuss in depth.² This author believes the best method to identify and emphasize effective long-term solutions to Iranian nuclear non-proliferation is to focus on the Iranian regime and the causal relationships driving it to become a nuclear-armed nation. This paper takes such an approach.

Persia: A Proud Empire Marginalized

To understand how to engage modern Iran, one must reflect upon the history of Western, especially U.S., engagement with this once extensive empire. Iran, the modern successor of the powerful and influential Persian Empire, is no newcomer to the conflict between East and West.³ Ancient Persia saw some of the first clashes with the West during its own expansionist period as King Darius I, and later his son Xerxes, struggled to keep many Greek city-states under Persian control. Some 150 years later, Alexander the Great rolled back Persian ambition as he conquered almost the entire known world.⁴ In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Persia suffered when caught between the Russian and British Empires as they struggled for supremacy in Central Asia. “The Great Game” eventually fractured an already declining Persian Empire, marginalized its influence in the region, and resulted in European powers dominating Persia for almost 140 years.⁵ The subsequent discovery of oil in the region kept European interests entrenched in Iranian affairs well into the 20th century through World War II.⁶

When the United States emerged as the Western world’s dominant power after World War II, many Iranians hoped that U.S. ideals of self-determination and pluralism would usher in a new era of Iranian – Western relations that would counter European imperialism and colonialism. This, however, was not to be. This became evident in 1953 when the United States, in concert with the United Kingdom, sponsored a coup against Mohammad Mossadeq, the duly elected Prime Minister of Iran. Intended to prevent the resurgence of Soviet expansion in the region via Iranian pro-communist political parties, the coup responded to Iran’s recent nationalization of its oil companies, a move that the United States and its partners saw as anti-Western (and injurious to Western oil companies.) The coup reinstated the absolute monarchy under Mohammad-Rezā Shāh

Pahlavi. While this move successfully blocked further Soviet influence, it also disaffected a large portion of the Iranian people. More importantly for this analysis, the coup sowed the seeds of future discontent, mistrust, and enmity towards the United States.⁷

This discontent was not immediately noticeable. Under the Shah, Iran garnered great wealth through its oil industries and made significant investments in schools, hospitals, health and sanitation services, and other public works.⁸ Despite these achievements, Iran started to become a nation of two extremes. The money that poured in supported the citizens of Tehran with a modern, Western lifestyle with access to health, education, and decision-making processes while leaving those in the poorer and more traditional countryside at the bottom of Iran's economic prosperity ladder.⁹ In addition to creating a culture of haves and have-nots, the racial attitudes of Westerners toward Iranians combined with conflicting moral values between the two cultures began to foster a resentment of all things Western.¹⁰

By the late 1970s, these dissident attitudes became enmeshed in an economy struggling with rising inflation, a growing police state used to control political enemies, and the collapse of the political system resulting in the formation of a single party subservient to the Shah.¹¹ Over time, the discontent sown in 1953 took root creating an atmosphere in Iran ripe for revolution. By the end of 1978, it became clear that the government of the Shah had lost control and could not preserve law and order.¹² On January 16, 1979, Mohammad-Rezā Shāh Pahlavi, driven from power, left Iran for the last time. On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile.¹³

What happened next formed the basis for contemporary U.S. – Iranian relations for the next 35 years and shaped future dialogue between these two nations. In November 1979, with active support of Ayatollah Khomeini, Islamic students took over the U.S. Embassy resulting in a diplomatic and political crisis that held the Carter administration, the American public, and 52 U.S. citizens hostage for 444 days. As author Michael Axworthy notes, “The humiliation of the hostage crisis, the failed rescue, and the subsequent failure of (President) Carter’s reelection campaign all combined to entrench in ordinary Americans a hostile attitude to Iran that still hampers attempts at rapprochement between the two countries.”¹⁴ At the same time, with the establishment of the Islamic republic and its theocratic constitution based in Islamic values and shari’a law, Iran’s distaste, distrust, and hatred for Western and American values and culture was no longer limited to the undercurrent in Iranian society. It became state policy.¹⁵

Since 1979, these entwined, conflicting views have shaped Iranian – U.S. engagement. The inability of both nations to work diplomatically led to many missteps in the late 20th century during incidents such as the downing of an Iranian passenger jet by the USS *Vincennes* during the so-called Tanker War and the Iran – Contra scandal.¹⁶ This diplomatic divide has only grown worse in the 21st century with Iran’s increasing sponsorship of terrorism in places such as Iraq and Lebanon, the support of rogue dictatorial regimes in Syria, and the rise of more bellicose, hard line Iranian politicians, such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who vowed to erase Israel from the “page of time.”¹⁷ Such was the environment the United States and the Western world found themselves in as they attempted to prevent Iran from becoming the next nation with an atomic weapon.

The Iranian Nuclear Program

Despite the foregoing, the pre-revolutionary period under the Shah (1953-1978) saw a time of active U.S. diplomatic and economic support for Iran. The United States and Iran were allies against communism with America providing assistance to many sectors of Iranian life. As part of a larger effort to help Iran become a modern, technologically advanced nation, the United States offered key support to the development of an Iranian nuclear power program. Beginning in 1957, the United States offered Iran extensive nuclear cooperation and supplied the nation with enriched uranium and a nuclear research reactor, the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). In 1968, Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) further opening the door for greater U.S. support as well as aid from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Argentina. This support included nuclear reactors, nuclear fuel, support equipment, and technical experts. With such active Western support, Iran even opened nuclear negotiations with India, Belgium, China, Italy, and Switzerland for nuclear technology.¹⁸

Nonetheless, even during these pre-revolutionary times of cooperation and détente, the United States remained wary of Iran's nuclear ambitions. A 1974 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), for example, observed that Iran was a proliferation risk.¹⁹ Although the Shah denied any interest in obtaining nuclear weapons, evidence shows that Iranian leaders gave their nuclear experts access to technologies that allowed them to shift quickly to a weapons program, if needed.²⁰

After the overthrow of the Shah and the installation of the Islamic state in 1979, Iran's nuclear program both receded and expanded. Immediately after seizing power, Ayatollah Khomeini, an ardent opponent of Iran's nuclear program who believed nuclear technology to be "Western" and anti-Islam, "cancelled payments to a European

(nuclear) enrichment consortium in which Iran had invested.”²¹ Several top nuclear engineers and scientists fled Iran while foreign suppliers stopped trade with the new regime and halted construction on key projects such as the Bushehr nuclear power plant.²² Not surprisingly, the United States stopped supplying Iran with highly enriched uranium (HEU) for the TRR.²³

This hiatus did not last long, however. Iran quickly resumed steps towards nuclear proliferation. During the 1980s, Iranian scientists and members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) began covertly coordinating with the underground nuclear supply network of Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan that resulted in Iran obtaining blueprints for sophisticated uranium enrichment centrifuges. Khan himself visited the Bushehr reactor in 1986 and 1987. Additionally, around the same period, President Rafsanjani reportedly ordered a feasibility study to examine nuclear weapons and delivery systems.²⁴

Into the 1990s, Iran signed agreements with other nations to rebuild the Bushehr plant as well as other agreements for light water reactors. However, because of concerns over the dual-use nature of this additional nuclear technology, the United States applied significant pressure to these nations and persuaded all, except Russia, to discontinue the sale and transfer of nuclear related technology to Iran.²⁵ Despite this and other U.S. initiatives, Iran made progress in uranium mining and conversion, heavy water reactor and production plant projects, and uranium enrichment.²⁶ Even though these moves did not necessarily place Iran on a fast track to obtaining a nuclear weapon, ample evidence existed during the last two decades of the 20th century to demonstrate that they were pursuing a path to nuclear proliferation.

Although Iranian actions during the 1980s and 1990s gave the West concern regarding their nuclear ambitions, two key events during the first decade of the 21st century ratcheted up the pressure between East and West and set the stage for the current confrontation between the United States and Iran. The first concerned a shift in Iranian politics from reformists to hard line conservatives culminating in the 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. These hard liners advocated a return to the doctrines and teachings of Khomeini, were deeply suspicious of social and political liberalization, and harbored deep suspicions of the West.²⁷ The inflexibility of this regime made any progressive discussion with the West, especially one regarding greater transparency of the Iranian nuclear program, nearly impossible. The second and more ominous event was the 2002 public disclosure of clandestine components of the Iranian nuclear program by an exiled Iranian opposition group (information most likely obtained from American intelligence shared with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)).²⁸ These clandestine components included “a uranium-enrichment plant and research laboratory at Natanz, and a heavy-water production plant at Arak, both capable of facilitating the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons.”²⁹

The public revelation of this information sparked several phases of diplomatic response. The first phase occurred between 2002 and 2005 when the West, through an effective use of incentive and coercion, obtained Iran’s begrudging acquiescence to indefinite demands that included disclosure of Iranian nuclear activities, detailed inspections of nuclear facilities, and cessation of uranium enrichment. However, the rise of Ahmadinejad and his allies in 2005 saw a halt in cooperation when, days after becoming President, he broke IAEA seals at the Isfahan nuclear facility and restarted

uranium conversion activities, a pre-cursor to uranium enrichment. This act led the IAEA to declare Iran in violation of the NPT and formally referred the issue to the United Nations Security Council.³⁰

The period from 2005 to 2011 saw several attempts at dialogue as the West offered ever-greater incentives for Iranian cooperation while also threatening to impose harsher sanctions for non-compliance. This period saw little progress in resolving the crisis. Any limited progress made suffered a setback when intelligence revealed that Iran had not only restarted its uranium enrichment program, but had also constructed another secret underground enrichment facility near the holy city of Qom.³¹ In 2012, this lack of progress finally resulted in international approval to impose punitive economic sanctions that effectively removed Iran's ability to use its central bank or receive payments for oil exports.³² In addition to these sanctions, the financial communications network SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) expelled most Iranian banks from its systems, greatly hampering the country's ability to conduct any financial transactions.³³

In November 2013, Iran and the Western leaders re-engaged in another round of diplomatic discussion regarding nuclear proliferation that led to the issuance of the Geneva Joint Plan of Action. This plan calls for Iran to take key steps toward non-proliferation, to include diluting half of its enriched uranium stocks, halting uranium enrichment above 5% (potential dual-use threshold), making no improvements to any nuclear facilities, constructing no new nuclear facilities, and allowing enhanced monitoring to include IAEA inspections. In turn, the West would suspend sanctions, impose no new sanctions, and facilitate a financial channel for humanitarian trade to

provide for Iran's domestic needs. This Joint Plan essentially restarted Western negotiations with Iran and served as an initial step towards a long-term comprehensive solution to ensure the peaceful use of nuclear technology in Iran.³⁴

Iranian Ambition

In light of the turbulent historical relationship between Iran and the Western powers, the technological challenges inherent with nuclear programs, and the potential conflict with the global community, why Iran would even pursue the development of a nuclear program is a reasonable question. This next section will address key reasons for Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology, inconsistencies in their declared pursuit of peaceful use nuclear capability, and a possible rationale for Iran's development of nuclear weapons.

As indicated earlier, Iran has publically pursued nuclear technology ostensibly to enhance its energy production capability.³⁵ As a signatory to the NPT, Iran has the legal right to such peaceful uses of nuclear technology provided its program remains transparent and accessible for international review.³⁶ However, with Iran seemingly awash in oil, an argument based on developing a nuclear program for internal energy use lacks plausibility. This conclusion, especially when combined with Iran's turbulent relations with the West and the potential dual-use nature of nuclear technology, fuels considerable international distrust regarding Iran's nuclear program.

Peaceful Pursuits?

Despite international fears and suspicions, Iran does have rational economic reasons for developing a nuclear energy program. These reasons have not changed significantly since the 1970s. First, nuclear energy would allow Iran to diversify its internal oil dependent energy sector. Moreover, as a growing Iranian population

depletes internal oil reserves, nuclear power gives Iran a viable alternative for sustaining long-term growth and a modern standard of living. Second, nuclear generated electricity would reduce internal consumption of petroleum based energy sources, thereby allowing for greater oil and gas exports. Some estimates state that a national nuclear energy program would release upwards of 200 million barrels of crude oil per year for additional export.³⁷

In addition to economic benefits, development of an independent Iranian nuclear power program has political and social benefits for the regime. Nuclear independence demonstrates Iran's autonomy and self-sufficiency from the West and offers proof to the world that Iran is a modern, technologically capable nation. Furthermore, the regime leverages nuclear technology development to spur internal nationalism touting it as a victory of national supremacy over "Western suppression."³⁸

Contradictions

On the surface, the reasons for Iranian nuclear development appear valid and convincing. Such broad assertions, however, cannot gloss over a program that repeatedly has shown numerous inconsistencies and contradictions. One key contradiction has been the fact that Iran's nuclear program, as currently structured, will not achieve the energy independence it claims to seek. Given the current state of Iran's nuclear program, investments will not reap benefits for Iran for several years, possibly decades. The diversion of resources from its petroleum industries, combined with sanctions, low oil prices, and other limiting revenue factors, already has had a substantial impact on oil production (almost 50% less today than during the Shah's regime). Critics maintain that increased Iranian investment in its petroleum industries,

and not its nuclear program, would be a more cost effective strategy to address Iran's growing short-term energy needs.³⁹

A second contradiction is Iran's history of blatant violations of U.N. agreements, treaties, and its intense efforts to hide these violations from the international community. As previously discussed, ever since the depths of Iran's deception and violations came to light in 2002, Tehran has played an ongoing game of "catch me if you can" with the West regarding its nuclear program. While this continuous game of Iranian disclosure and concealment has resulted in tighter sanctions, it also provided Iran large periods of time to continue their nuclear programs without any oversight or scrutiny from the international community. Iran's continued obstructionism and lack of transparency with its nuclear program strongly suggests that their motives are far from peaceful.⁴⁰

A third and highly significant contradiction to Iran's claims of peaceful nuclear development is its insistence on controlling the program's full fuel cycle, specifically the enrichment portion.⁴¹ Iran claims to have the inherent sovereign right to control the full fuel cycle and that such control is necessary due to "a history of unreliable foreign fuel suppliers."⁴² As part of the fuel cycle, Iran also insists that it needs to enrich uranium to 20 percent versus the normal 3-5 percent. Iran claims to need this 20 percent medium enriched uranium (MEU) to manufacture fuel plates for nuclear power plant fuel rods and to produce medical isotopes at the TRR.⁴³ Production of 20 percent MEU, however, is not simply a technical issue. Uranium enriched to 20 percent has dual-use implications in that it reduces the so-called breakout time required to manufacture a nuclear weapon from months to possibly weeks. Such capability causes obvious concern for Western powers.⁴⁴

Critics of Iran's nuclear program point out the specious basis of these arguments and cite examples that demonstrate the contradictory nature of Iran's claims. First, Iran needs to neither manufacture nor enrich its own nuclear fuel. Other nations, such as Russia, could easily sell it to Iran. Indeed buying nuclear fuel on the open market is considerably cheaper than maintaining a full fuel cycle program.⁴⁵ Additionally, having a declared nuclear power manage Iran's nuclear fuel adds transparency and greater accountability, leading to increased legitimacy of Iran's nuclear efforts. Nor is Iran's claim that it needs to manage the full fuel cycle to provide strategic security and access to nuclear fuel compelling. "Since the beginning of the nuclear age, no nuclear reactor has stopped operations because fuel was denied for political reasons."⁴⁶ This fact is even true for Iran when, in 1987, it negotiated a deal with Argentina to receive a new core for the TRR.⁴⁷ Not least, denial of nuclear fuel to any nation that has a fully compliant nuclear program would be in conflict with Article IV of the NPT.

Second, the manufacture of 20 percent MEU to support fuel plate production is neither cost effective nor efficient unless a nation has at least ten nuclear reactors. Iran is not likely to have ten reactors within any reasonable period to justify such uranium enrichment. Additionally, any Iranian claims that they need 20 percent MEU to make medical isotopes is spurious because Iran can easily purchase such isotopes on the international market. Regardless, Iran currently has enough MEU on hand to support isotope production for a decade.⁴⁸

The Bomb

Given Iran's violation of the NPT and other international agreements, its lack of transparency, and its consistent clandestine behavior, Tehran's claim to want a nuclear program only for energy purposes appears to be, at best, an inaccurate

characterization, and at worst, specious propaganda. Regardless, it is difficult to ignore the evidence that leads the international community to speculate that Iran is working towards becoming the next nation with an atomic bomb. Knowing, however, that such action has brought additional scrutiny on Iran that could add to growing economic sanctions, why would the leaders in Tehran move in such a direction?

Two key reasons present themselves for such a move: regime survival and regional influence. Since 2001, the Iranian regime has witnessed the West, and primarily the United States, topple two nations on its borders. Moreover, since President George W. Bush labeled Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil” and successive U.S. administrations have made it policy to change Iran’s behavior, it is easy to comprehend why Iranian leaders believe they are in America’s sights.⁴⁹ The fates of former U.S. “enemies” such as Manuel Noriega, Slobodan Milošević, Muammar Qaddafi, and of course, Saddam Hussein only reinforce such thoughts.⁵⁰ Considering these factors, Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons offers a reasonable counterweight to the overwhelming conventional power of Western nations.

Moreover, nuclear weapons help sustain regime survival for Tehran by countering the military strengths that technology provides Western forces. From a purely military perspective, nuclear weapons place weaker nations, like Iran, on a more even footing with technologically advanced militaries and “make it possible to do monstrous violence to the enemy without first achieving victory.”⁵¹ Nuclear weapons are small and easy to hide, leaders can calibrate their destruction level, military forces can easily deliver them via ballistic missiles (even if the enemy controls the air, sea, and major portions of the ground), their effects are easy to predict, and they are potentially

devastating not only physically but also psychologically.⁵² Even if the West could launch significant precision strikes against Iranian ballistic missile sites, the likelihood remains high that some nuclear missiles would elude detection and destruction just as Iraq's SCUD missiles did in Operation Desert Storm.⁵³ The effect of detonating just one nuclear weapon on key command, control, computer, communications and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) nodes would be overwhelming for Western forces. The very presence of these weapons would force Western powers into assuming a much greater risk as they operate and maneuver within the region. This increased risk may cause Western nations, especially a war weary United States, to reassess how they would employ kinetic military action against Iran, or even if they would employ it at all. Regardless, having the bomb gives Tehran a greater violent deterrent option to employ in preserving the regime.

Additionally, nuclear weapons offer Iran greater political capital. For example, in any nuclear confrontation with Iran, the West must weigh the costs in terms of international political fallout. Tehran understands the Western aversion to collateral damage in any type of conflict. Thus, there is little doubt that Iran will place some of their key military and nuclear capability close to urban areas to ensure any U.S. attack would kill innocent Iranian citizens.⁵⁴ Iran, already considered by many to be a pariah nation, has less to lose, especially if regime survival is at stake. The regime may even convince its own citizens of their patriotic duty to act as human shields to preserve the nation in a contemporary David vs. Goliath story with Iran's atomic bomb being the modern equivalent of a rock and sling. The inability to minimize casualties, combined with the possible political and diplomatic risks of taking offensive action, constrains U.S.

options against a nuclear-armed Iran giving Iran a greater probability of regime survival.⁵⁵

Lastly, Iranian possession of nuclear weapons may influence internal dissent, as well, to help ensure regime survival. Even if regime survival is not directly at stake from external forces, a humiliating and crushing defeat of Iranian conventional forces in a small regional conflict (e.g. at the Straits of Hormuz) might trigger internal uprisings and even lead to an overthrow of a seemingly weakened government. Instead, coercive escalation threatening the use of nuclear weapons might demonstrate Iran's resolve and force the international community to negotiate an end to hostilities before the regime becomes susceptible to internal regime change.⁵⁶ Additionally, this show of strength could demonstrate the regime's determination to its internal audience, further staving off any internal conflict keeping the regime in power.

Regime survival is not the only benefit atomic weapons would bring to Iran. Acquisition of nuclear weapons also gives Tehran a powerful instrument to foster its return to a position of regional influence. As author Shashank Joshi notes:

Iran has longstanding aspirations to regional leadership, out of proportion with its economic or military power. It is possible that nuclear weapons, especially if openly deployed, would strengthen these aspirations on symbolic grounds alone, make other regional states more amenable to this narrative, and lessen the influence of the United States in the region.⁵⁷

Iran's possession of atomic weapons would most certainly have varying degrees of effect on all of these factors.

For example, just as the acquisition of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes promotes national pride and international prestige, some in Iran may view obtaining nuclear weapons as a national accomplishment. Obtaining the bomb, and more importantly keeping it, would demonstrate to the world the depth and breadth of

Tehran's power as it did for India when India outmaneuvered the United States and China to obtain its nuclear capability.⁵⁸ This perception of increasing political leverage supported by the accompanying surge of nationalism could propel Iran to a position of regional, and even global, influence. For example, Saudi Arabia will most likely see Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons as an effort to "dominate the Gulf" both politically and militarily. Having the bomb, along with the accompanying surge of Persian pride, humiliates the Saudis politically by giving Iran the political prestige and reputation that accompanies nations with nuclear weapons while subsequently lessening that of neighbors like Saudi Arabia.⁵⁹ Such a scenario plays directly into recapturing lost glories and esteem not seen since the days of the Persian Empire.

However, it is important to note that Iran must tread carefully here and maximize ways to legitimize its acquisition of nuclear weapons as well as demonstrate it has the capability to be a responsible nuclear actor as India has done. Nations like North Korea and Pakistan offer sobering reminders of regimes who have not benefited from an increase in prestige because of their continued violations of the NPT and their belligerent foreign policies.⁶⁰

Besides increasing national pride, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons gives it greater regional influence by keeping other regional powers in check (e.g. Israel and Saudi Arabia). By possessing atomic weapons, Iran serves notice to its neighbors that it is a nation to be challenged only at an opponent's peril.⁶¹ In essence, an Iranian nuclear capability moves the Middle East to a point where "risk management will replace cost-benefit calculations" and a type of regional fear of nuclear devastation and holocaust

would overshadow political and military decisions.⁶² Neighbors will most likely avoid conflicts with Iran if nuclear coercion becomes part of the equation.

In addition to the factors already addressed, possession of atomic weapons diminishes the sway and influence of the declared nuclear powers. Author Paul Bracken argues that many in the international community believe the original nuclear powers worked for years to maintain their monopoly on nuclear weapons in order to retain political and economic advantage over nations who did not have them. The five powers did this while also using the NPT to prevent these same non-nuclear nations from gaining similar advantages by becoming nuclear weapons capable.⁶³ This perception continues today as none of the major nuclear powers has unilaterally renounced its possession or use of nuclear weapons.⁶⁴ In fact, in a 2009 speech, President Obama categorically stated, “as long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure, and effective (nuclear) arsenal.”⁶⁵

Therefore, from the perspective of the outsider, Iran sees the major powers as members of a special club who use their nuclear capability as a tool to shape and influence other nations. Moreover, the major powers do this while concurrently using the NPT to deny secondary nations, like Iran, access to this very same tool as a way to diminish their regional and global influence. Tehran is well aware that possession of nuclear weapons and nuclear technology levels the political and economic field between Iran and the United States just as nuclear weapons possession did for the Soviet Union, China, India, and Pakistan.

From the information outlined above, one can easily conclude that there are several factors driving Iran’s desire for a nuclear program. Regardless of whether the

program is energy production as Iran claims or is a clandestine effort to become the next member of the nuclear weapons club, the same set of factors influence Iran's desire to go nuclear. Author Shahram Chubin sums it up nicely:

...these values can be expressed as independence, equality, and respect. As a nation, Iranians reflect an extreme sensitivity to any appearance of dependence, dictation, or domination by others and desire to be taken seriously, treated without discrimination, and accorded the status that Iran's importance in the world merits.⁶⁶

International Concerns

Values, interests, and principles also drive the United States, its allies, and its partners. Many of these values are similar to those influencing Iran such as "dignity, tolerance, and equality among all people."⁶⁷ However, Iran's consistent non-compliance with the NPT and other international nuclear non-proliferation norms, defiance of the U.N. Security Council regarding Iran's nuclear program, and resistance to international diplomacy have put some of these interests at direct odds with the United States and its allies.⁶⁸ These facts, coupled with Iran's sponsorship of terrorism, make Tehran's nuclear proliferation ambitions a top priority for international non-proliferation efforts. To understand these tensions, the next section will highlight elements of U.S. nuclear policy toward Iran, examine the effects of those policies on Iran's nuclear ambitions, and address some of the shortcomings and weaknesses of this policy.

Current United States Nuclear Non-Proliferation Policy

President Obama, in his 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS), clearly delineates the U.S. stance on the proliferation of nuclear weapons when he notes, "The gravest danger to the American people and global security continues to come from weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons."⁶⁹ The Department of Defense's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) further articulates five key objectives designed to meet

this threat.⁷⁰ While all five strategic objectives are critical for U.S. efforts to reduce the global possession of nuclear weapons, the objective at the top of the U.S. nuclear agenda, and the main one focusing on Iran, is the prevention of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism.⁷¹ Nested within this priority objective are several key means to prevent Iranian nuclear proliferation. These specifically include engaging Iran diplomatically through negotiation, if possible, and through isolation and international pressure if negotiation fails; impeding the flow of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology; and holding fully accountable “any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor that supports or enables terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction.”⁷²

Incentives and Coercion

While the use of military force always remains an option for the United States in preventing nuclear proliferation, the foregoing review makes it clear that the primary focus on curbing Iran’s proliferation efforts follows the traditional diplomatic avenues of incentives and coercion, mostly via sanctions. Ever since the 2002 public disclosure of Iran’s clandestine nuclear program, the United States and its partners have tried numerous incentives to entice Iran into making their nuclear program more open, transparent, and compliant. Unfortunately, these overtures have failed to produce success. For example, in 2004, the EU3 (France, Great Britain, and Germany) offered Iran an opportunity for increased trade and aid, a security guarantee against an invasion, and nuclear fuel and civil nuclear technology in exchange for a more transparent program. Although Tehran initially demonstrated limited compliance, the rise of the hard line Ahmadinejad regime in 2005 and the subsequent restart of the MEU

enrichment program halted progress. At the same time, Ahmadinejad dismissed the EU3 overtures as being “insulting and humiliating.”⁷³

In 2007, as part of an effort to reengage with Iran and open their nuclear program to more scrutiny, the P5+1 (United States, Russia, China, France, Great Britain, and Germany) offered a series of greater incentives. These included easing Iranian civil aviation sanctions, five years worth of nuclear fuel, a light-water nuclear reactor, an energy partnership with the European Union (EU), and the possibility for Iran to resume enrichment at a later date.⁷⁴ Iran, however, rejected or ignored these overtures. Additionally, throughout this period, Iran covertly built a third secret underground enrichment facility, Fordow, near the holy city of Qom, which the global community discovered only in 2009.⁷⁵

Lastly, from 2007 to 2012, despite additional proposals by the United States and its partners, all incentive offers received lukewarm Iranian attention and failed to curb their nuclear ambitions.⁷⁶ By 2012, this lack of Iranian engagement ultimately led the United States and the EU to impose punitive economic sanctions.⁷⁷ Despite the best efforts of the international community, their incentives did little to stop Iran’s nuclear program. Moreover, because of the resulting lack of international oversight over several years, the program used the additional time and secrecy to produce supplementary MEU and construct additional nuclear facilities.

Incentives, of course, were not the only tool used to convince Iran to stop their nuclear proliferation activities and open their programs for inspection. As mentioned earlier, from 2002 to 2012, the United States used a coercive strategy that applied increasing rhetoric and threat of sanctions to compel Iran to cease their nuclear

weapons related activities and fully disclose all aspects of their nuclear program. These years saw the ebb and flow of Iranian discussion, diplomacy, rejection, and return to discussion as the United Nations gradually applied increasing sanctions affecting Iran's nuclear program. However, as previously mentioned, it was not until 2012 that the United States and the EU finally imposed punitive sanctions on Iran.⁷⁸

The overall affects of incentives and sanctions on the Iranian regime for the past 12 years remain undetermined. Using stall tactics and brinkmanship, Tehran continues to be non-compliant with the NPT and the United Nations. Whether Iran does this to pressure the United States and its partners to offer additional incentives or actually to create a nuclear weapon remains unknown. Although the recent 2013 Geneva Joint Plan of Action is a hopeful sign of reengagement, it remains clear that offering the same types of incentives and coercion have, to date, failed to bend Iran to the international community's will regarding nuclear proliferation.

What is the Problem?

Given that incentives and coercion have not yielded positive results, one must ask why? Several key reasons present themselves. First, sanctions have "a poor record of getting regimes to abandon high-priority policies."⁷⁹ While some may argue that sanctions simply have not had enough time to be effective, historical examples argue otherwise as regimes such as Cuba, North Korea, South Africa, and Iran remained in power after many years of economic sanctions.⁸⁰ Furthermore, for Iran specifically, maintaining multilateral sanctions is difficult because of significant foreign investment (e.g. China, Russia, Germany, France, and Japan) and the inability of these governments to disengage themselves from the regime. Because none of these nations wants to abandon their investments only to have other powers move in, sanctions

oftentimes are an ineffective, hollow threat or, as history shows, take years, sometimes decades, to garner even the most subtle results.⁸¹

Another key limitation of sanctions has been that the United States and its allies have not adequately defined how sanctions lead to success. In theory, the ultimate goal of sanctions would be to break Iran's resistance by denying the regime the means to meet its desired ends. Unfortunately, the United States and EU have not agreed on the best approach to affect Iran's will or deny Iran the means for obtaining a nuclear weapon. Nor is it clear whether cessation of uranium enrichment, stopping only MEU enrichment, the dismantlement of Iran's nuclear facilities, cooperation with the IAEA or a combination of these efforts truly constitutes success.⁸²

In addition, denial strategies such as import / export controls and sanctions on material for nuclear weapons manufacture (e.g. centrifuge parts or ballistic missile components) have not proven effective. Iran simply uses alternative supply chains, both legitimate and illegitimate, to obtain such material, or settles for lower quality goods that it can import.⁸³ While taking such steps may be more fiscally expensive for Iran, it is a price Tehran is currently willing to pay to maintain the momentum of its nuclear program.

Lastly, sanctions may make détente and negotiation more difficult in the long term. For example, sanctions can validate Iranian hard line claims that the United States and the EU are not interested in negotiation, only regime change, making East – West rapport more difficult. Sanctions could also generate popular dissent at the street level within Iran. On the surface, this may seem to be a desirable option for the United States and its current policy of changing the regime's behavior. However, internal unrest has

the potential to force Iran to crack down on dissidents resulting in an even more repressive regime. Indeed, internal dissent might even hasten Iran's drive to develop a nuclear weapon to deter foreign interference and ensure regime survival.⁸⁴

While the failure of coercion to influence Iran's nuclear proliferation efforts has numerous causes, one can link the failure of incentives to one simple foundation. Incentives do not target the base causes of Iranian proliferation, which are the same reasons they want to obtain nuclear weapons in the first place: the desire for regime stability and regional influence. Iran has been a pariah nation since the 1979 revolution. From Iran's perspective, its primary option is to accept a few token appeasements to stop proliferating. However, these tokens offer no real opportunity to reincorporate Iran into the full international community. The second, even less palatable option is to suffer ever-escalating sanctions. In effect, Iran perceives that it has no real choice as the United States and the EU are offering nothing of real value. If the United States is serious about Iranian nuclear non-proliferation, it must give Tehran a better reason to cease its proliferation activities.

The Grand Bargain

With these challenges and the turbulent contemporary history between Iran and the United States, a realistic path towards ending Iranian nuclear proliferation may be a difficult one, but it is not impossible. The building of this path starts with two key actions. First, the United States must publicly assure Iran that the United States will not "use force against Iran the way we did against such nonnuclear adversaries as Serbia and Iraq" to affect regime change. Such a statement would undoubtedly be essential as part of any realistic negotiation with Iran. Second, it requires both nations to outline a firm, realistic way towards restoring normal economic and diplomatic Iranian – American

relations. “In return, Iran would be required to open its nuclear program to unfettered international inspections to guarantee that the program is used solely for peaceful power-generation purposes.” This strategy is what author Ted Galen Carpenter calls “The Grand Bargain.”⁸⁵

Such a bold effort is fraught with tough challenges. First, any Grand Bargain will require the United States and Iran to address Tehran’s sponsorship of terrorism and its aggression towards Israel. Second, such a bargain would likely contain the already familiar construct of incentives and coercion that have not worked well, to date with, no guarantee that they would work now. Third, the United States would have to reassure allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially Saudi Arabia, that the United States remains firmly committed to GCC regional stability and support. Finally, the U.S. government, along with the government of Iran, would have to overcome years of mistrust and suspicion that have permeated the consciousness of both nations since 1979.⁸⁶

Despite these difficulties, there are good reasons to make such a daring offer. First, it would not involve the use of military action. High-level diplomacy to solve international crises would be a welcome change to an American public that has grown tired of using the U.S. military to solve the world’s problems over the past 13 years. Second, the youth of Iran already have a favorable attitude towards the United States.⁸⁷ Restoring diplomatic relations would help foster even more popularity among this demographic and is the best hope for cultivating long-term stability in U.S. – Iranian relations and bridging the gap of mistrust caused by the 1979 revolution. This new relationship, in turn, holds the possibility of creating conditions for the Iranian people to

instigate true regime reform. Also, normalized relations offer Iran greater credibility with regional nations and the international community; thereby increasing regional influence, something they desire. Most importantly, such a bargain gives Iran what it desperately wants: a significant guarantee from its main adversary that the people and the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran are recognized, respected, and guaranteed to survive well into the future.⁸⁸

Furthermore, taking such a significant step has one added incentive for both Iran and the United States. Implementing a Grand Bargain has not only the potential to resolve Iran's nuclear proliferation issues, it could serve as a catalyst to bridge the 35-year gap of mistrust and suspicion. Diplomatic recognition, combined with increased U.S. access to the Islamic Republic and its people, offers both sides the opportunity for increased contact, greater dialogue, and provides each country a greater chance to move forward collectively to address even larger regional issues.

Despite the extensive efforts of the United States and its allies over the past several years, coercion and confrontational strategies such as sanctions have yielded little except "stalemate and misery."⁸⁹ Conversely, incentives have also gained the United States little in the way of positive results. Critics may further contend that offering larger incentives, such as a Grand Bargain, will simply result in larger failures. However, for any incentive to work, two things must occur. First, the United States must offer Iran the right incentive. The Grand Bargain is the right incentive because it holds the promise of giving the Iranian regime what it has sought since 1979: validation, legitimacy, influence, and assurances of continued regime survival from the world's dominant political and economic power and Iran's main global adversary.

Second, the U.S. must offer the Grand Bargain at the right time. It is evident from recent political changes in Iran that the time is right for such engagement. Although the Supreme Council, led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has final say in all state matters and wields significant influence on the selection of candidates for Iranian elections, the popular election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 signals the desire, by both the Iranian people and the Iranian Supreme Council leadership, for a return to pragmatic and conservative ideals.⁹⁰ These ideals include working toward negotiations and normalizing relations with the international community.⁹¹ Rouhani himself has emphasized his desire to “recalibrate Iran’s relations with the world” and offered greater transparency with Iran’s nuclear program.⁹² Indeed, the November 2013 Geneva Joint Plan of Action could be a first step in Iran’s return to the international community and to the transparency desperately desired by the United States and the EU.⁹³ For the United States and its allies, despite the inherent challenges, the time to take action towards a Grand Bargain is now. Offering such a path in the wake of the Joint Plan of Action is the best incentive the United States can offer Iran for its nuclear compliance and may very well be the tipping point that leads U.S. diplomatic efforts to successful long-term engagement.

East Meets West

This paper has briefly examined key aspects of Iranian nuclear aspirations in an effort to highlight the factors motivating Iran to obtain nuclear weapons and the steps that the United States can, and should, take to prevent Iran from becoming the next nuclear nation. A Grand Bargain offers not only a realistic opportunity for the United States to stop Iran’s nuclear proliferation efforts, it also serves as a potential springboard towards greater rapprochement between the two nations. Iran, however,

must do its part by complying with all international laws and treaties regarding its nuclear program and allow full, open, and unfettered access to verify compliance. Additionally, as part of any Grand Bargain, Iran will have to demonstrate its commitment to rejoining the international community by abandoning state sponsored terrorism and demonstrate to the U.S. and its allies, whether covertly or overtly, the acceptance of Israel and its survival as status quo.

After 35 years of division, mistrust, and hatred, the United States and EU have two choices. They can increase pressure on Iran further isolating them, or give Tehran a realistic, viable, and honorable path towards respectability and international decency. A Grand Bargain offers this opportunity not only to Iran, but also to the United States and the international community.

Endnotes

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