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Iran and the Next U.S. President

[Dennis Ross](#)

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With 2013 looming as a decisive year in Iran's nuclear efforts, the next administration will likely accelerate both sanctions and the diplomatic process to create greater clarity before resorting to force.

Regardless of who is elected on November 6th, Iran's nuclear program is going to be one of the most important challenges the next president is going to have to confront. Unless Iran's leaders shift course and suddenly decide to suspend their ongoing enrichment of uranium, the continuing progress of the Iranian nuclear program will require additional moves by the United States and the international community. From an American standpoint, it is important to remember that both President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney have committed themselves to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and not containing it after it has done so. At the current pace of Iran's nuclear efforts, the Iranian nuclear program will reach a point some time before the end of 2013 where the accumulation of low and medium enriched uranium will make it difficult for the United States to know with confidence that it could prevent Iran's leaders from presenting the world with a *fait accompli* -- meaning the Iranians might well be able to produce a nuclear weapon so quickly that we would not have time to prevent it.

To be sure, the Iranians could decide to slow the pace of their efforts either because they fear a military response or to try to gain sanctions relief given the economic pain they are experiencing. But that would require a change in Iran's behavior. Barring that, either a re-elected President Obama or a newly elected Governor Romney will have to decide what else needs to be done to fulfill their objective of prevention.

For President Obama, this is probably an easier task. He has lived with this issue for the last four years and thought it through. He has developed a strategy of increasing the pressure on the Iranians and the cost they pay for their continuing defiance of the international community, while also leaving them a diplomatic way out if they choose to take it. And there is no doubt that the Iranians are paying a terrible economic price:

crippling sanctions have been imposed and led to a dramatic reduction in Iran's oil production and sales -- the principal source of revenue for the Iranian government. Iran's currency by some estimates is being devalued by half every two months, meaning that inflation is raging upwards, goods are dramatically more expensive and savings are losing their value. Doing business internationally has been made nearly impossible.

Iran's Supreme Leader, while maintaining a posture of defiance, recently described the sanctions as "brutal." Previously, he always spoke of how the sanctions would make Iran stronger and more self-sufficient. Now he calls on Iran's officials to stop blaming each other for the economic maladies sanctions are imposing. None of this means that Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, is about to change course, but it does mean that for President Obama, the strategy of pressure is having an effect. Still, the Iranian centrifuges keep spinning and the Iranians keep accumulating enriched uranium. As a result, President Obama is likely to look for ways to intensify the pressure economically and coercively -- further emphasizing that the time for diplomacy is running out and all options are on the table.

Governor Romney has not lived with the issue for the last four years. Should he be elected, he will need time to establish his Administration and conduct a review of the issue. He is far less likely than President Obama to be able to move quickly on the issue, but like the President, he probably will see the value of increased economic and military pressure as a way of not simply raising the costs to the Iranians but also conveying to them that if diplomacy fails we will be prepared to use force.

Such a posture and such messaging will also give the Israelis a reason to continue to cooperate with the United States on the next steps vis-a-vis Iran. In his speech to the United Nations, Prime Minister Netanyahu focused on the importance of Iran seeing that there is a red-line it should not cross in its nuclear development. His red-line was on limiting Iran to less than a bomb's worth of medium enriched uranium; in truth, what he was getting at is how to define the meaning of prevention and ensuring that Iran does not pass the point where prevention can no longer be achieved. In this connection, applying greater pressure on the Iranians matters to the Israelis, particularly because it conveys a readiness to do what is necessary to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons. But it will also be important to discuss our respective views on how to ensure prevention -- as the Obama Administration is doing with the Israelis. No doubt that will continue if President Obama is re-elected or if Governor Romney becomes president.

But there is one other thing both are likely to do. Each is likely to try a more dramatic diplomatic initiative or end-game proposal with the Iranians. They will do it not just to test the possibility that Iran may yet be prepared to accept an outcome that provides them civil nuclear power but with restrictions that would prevent them from having a break-out capability to nuclear weapons. They will do it not just to expose the Iranians before the world and their own public if they turn down such a proposal. They will do it also to show the American public that we went the extra mile if force proves necessary.

No American president will resort to force without such a demonstration. The stalemated talks between the 5+1 and the Iranians have focused largely on a step by step approach designed to have the Iranians show they are prepared to bring their nuclear program into compliance with their international obligations. If there was plenty of time to let the pressures build on the Iranians, the step by step approach might yet work. But with 2013 looming as a decisive year one way or the other, either President Obama or Governor

Romney is likely to see the need to accelerate the diplomatic process to create far greater clarity. If there is to be a diplomatic way out of the conflict with the Iranians over their nuclear program, sharpening the choice for Iran's leaders may also be the only way to produce it.

Dennis Ross is counselor at The Washington Institute.