

Responding to the Iran Crisis:

How to Reconcile Competing Priorities

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Brief Analysis

The questionable outcome of Iran's June 12 presidential election and the regime's harsh suppression of the ensuing popular protests have sparked a global outcry, and would appear to offer a golden opportunity to rally international pressure on Tehran. The international community's response, however, has so far offered little in concrete terms, being diverse -- ranging from U.S. president Barack Obama's caution, to German chancellor Angela Merkel's tough criticism, to Russian and Chinese leaders' embrace of the announced results -- and seemingly uncoordinated. To mount a more tangible response to the Iran crisis, the United States and its allies will have to weigh their options against varying international policy priorities.

Competing Priorities

The election crisis in Iran is not dissimilar to past events elsewhere around the world. Devising an effective international response, however, is more difficult than in other cases because of the tension between two competing international priorities. First is the U.S. and EU desire to stay out of the way of any internal transformation in Iran. To this end, these countries have avoided inserting themselves into what appears to be a growing challenge to the legitimacy of the autocratic regime of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The second priority is to demonstrate to Tehran that flagrant disregard of international opinion incurs a cost, a lesson with clear implications for nuclear diplomacy with Iran.

The first priority argues for doing little, whereas the second argues for clear and coordinated action. Further complicating matters is that any internal challenge to the regime is likely to unfold over several years (Ayatollah Khomeini's efforts to topple the Shah, for example, began in earnest with the riots of 1963 and culminated sixteen years later in the 1979 Islamic Revolution), whereas Iran is projected to become nuclear weapons-capable much sooner. Thus, the urgency of the second priority -- preventing Iran's nuclearization -- clashes with what is increasingly seen as the primacy of the first priority of avoiding the derailment of internally generated change.

Principles for an International Response

These constraints and competing priorities suggest several parameters for coordinated international action in response to the Iranian regime's recent actions:

- The United States will likely look to its European and Asian allies to take the lead on any response, as these countries lack the baggage that the United States and the UK carry with respect to Iran;
- To maintain Russian and Chinese support, and to avoid the appearance of excessive interference, any reaction will probably focus less on the elections than on the ensuing violence. Russia's attitude was summed up by President Dmitri Medvedev, who on June 23 described as "absolutely inadmissible" any effort at "mentoring, forcing democracy, and . . . direct interference" in the region. Given this view, it is unsurprising that the June 26 statement of the G8 foreign ministers was relatively tepid on Iran;
- To the extent that sanctions would censure the regime for its recent actions, such measures would likely to be tightly targeted or even symbolic in order to avoid diverting the Iranian people's anger from Iranian authorities to foreign powers, thereby playing into the regime's hands.

Some will argue that the election crisis will actually make the Iranian regime more inclined to engage with Washington, due to either its consolidation of power or desire for international absolution. If accurate, this argument, combined with wanting to avoid "meddling," makes a persuasive case for inaction. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, however, dismissed suggestions that he will moderate his stance on the nuclear issue in his second term, and the arrest of nine Iranian employees of the British embassy in Tehran indicates that the regime's confrontational stance has not changed.

Options for Response

While the United States and its allies have a broad range of sanctions at their disposal to use as leverage with respect to Iran's nuclear program, responses specifically aimed at Iran's election crisis are likely to be much narrower and follow the pattern of previous international responses to election-related fraud and violence.

Diplomatic steps. Many U.S. allies maintain embassies in Tehran and regularly host visiting Iranian officials. Iranian Nobel Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, speaking in Brussels on June 23, urged EU leaders to avoid meeting Iranian government officials, and to downgrade their embassies in Tehran. While most nations are generally reluctant to take such steps, they are not without precedent. Following Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa calling for the killing of British author Salman Rushdie, EU countries withdrew their ambassadors from Tehran, as they did in 1997 following a Berlin court's finding that top Iranian leaders had ordered assassination of Iranian dissidents in that city.

It appears less likely that the United States will entirely abandon engagement with Iran or that nuclear negotiations by the P5+1 -- permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany -- will cease, given the strategic imperative of addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions. Nevertheless, President Obama was wise to cast doubt on June 26 on prospects for direct U.S.-Iran dialogue, in order to avoid inadvertently helping the regime divert attention from its domestic crisis and to signal that the regime should not expect "business as usual." Even Tehran's perception that the United States and its allies were actively preparing the ground for sanctions could bolster this approach and counteract relatively weak consensus statements, such as the one issued by G8 foreign ministers on June 26.

Sanctions. Numerous Iranian officials and entities -- including IRGC officers and the Basij militia commander -- are already subject to travel restrictions and asset freezes related mostly to proliferation and terrorism. These restrictions could be expanded to include human rights-related sanctions, emulating the international response to the anti-democratic actions of the regimes in Belarus and Zimbabwe. This could include bans on non-official travel by Iran's top security and political leaders and their families, since such travel to Europe is reportedly common. More difficult would be restricting official travel or ordering Iran to reduce the size of its embassies, given that Iran is involved in a broad range of international political and economic issues.

The United States and its allies could also consider an expansion of trade sanctions. While activists such as Ebadi have warned against this -- arguing that sanctions harm Iran's people more than its leaders -- a June 22 Wall Street

Journal article detailing the involvement of Western firms in Iran's internet censorship has renewed interest in targeted trade sanctions in both the United States and Europe. Although many Iranians might welcome penalizing such trade with Tehran, it also carries risks. U.S.-EU coordination on such steps is important, as any extraterritorial U.S. action against European firms could violate trade agreements and spark retaliation. Also, sanctions would need to be finely calibrated to ensure that they did not inadvertently restrict the access of Iranian citizens to the telecommunications infrastructure that appeared to play an important role in the demonstrations.

Other steps. Beyond the punitive steps above, tools are also available to encourage the free flow of ideas and information in Iran. While the Obama administration did not request the renewal of the Bush administration's controversial democracy funding for Iran in its 2010 budget request, recent reports suggest that this may change in the wake of the current crisis. Funding could also be increased for Radio Farda, Voice of America's Farsi service, and people-to-people exchanges, which received \$34 million in the 2008 U.S. federal budget. Such steps are likely to be the subject of heated debate, given that their past effectiveness has been widely questioned, and they could convey the impression of interference that Washington is so determined to avoid.

Conclusion

The international community may mount only a weak response to the Iranian crisis, given competing U.S. and EU priorities and the traditional difficulty of organizing international action to defend democracy. The consequences of such a response, however, would be severe since this would miss a rare opportunity to unite much of the international community in condemnation of the regime's abuses. More importantly, Iran's leaders would be led to question the resolve of the international community and perhaps to dismiss future threats of pressure, complicating international efforts to halt Iran's march toward a nuclear weapon.

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