

Upheaval in Iran Doesn't Change Nuclear Calculus

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With Iranians still blaming the U.S. for a coup in 1953, it might be understandable why President Obama has been low-key in dealing with the violence and disputed results of the Iranian election. He wants to deprive the mullahs of an enemy in their faceoff with hundreds of thousands of protesters.

Moreover, assuming the U.S. is not willing to militarily intervene, it would be problematic for the administration to exhort people to rise up. This is not an easy position for the U.S. to take. Its sympathies are clearly with the reformers who seek a better life, even if the protest focus is not to end the Islamic republic but rather to change it.

But the Obama administration would be wise to stick with a low-key, pro-reform approach while keeping its eye on the ball: the prospects of a nuclear Iran. There is little doubt that Iran has been a destabilizing force in the Middle East, supporting terrorism and bent on a nuclear enrichment program in defiance of the U.N. Security Council.

It's precisely this area of foreign policy where the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, will not want to lose control, viewing it as key to regime survival. Even if he makes domestic concessions to defuse this crisis, he will likely still hold the reins of the nuclear program.

This also explains President Obama's current stance. The U.S. could be left dealing with unsavory elements of the regime if Washington wants to forestall a nuclear Iran. As such, Obama will be taking a page out of the past. In the tradition of the 1970s and 1980s in dealing with the Soviet Union, the U.S. knew how to balance its aim for nuclear arms control alongside concerns for human rights. This dual approach cast a spotlight on the Soviets' legitimacy deficit.

Then and Now

Yet, there are differences between then and now. Classic Cold War deterrence is inadequate with Iran. At that time, there was ongoing communication between the United States and the Soviet Union, including functioning embassies and a leadership hotline. Even so, there were near-miscalculations.

In the case of Iran, there is a lack of communication and lots of local triggers for conflict. Unlike the case of the Soviet Union, where there were baseline understandings on international rules of the game, Iranian leaders call for wiping out Israel. Moreover, key Arab and regional regimes will respond to a nuclear Iran by pursuing their own program, which would produce a nuclear Middle East. In other words, an area already riven with conflict could be filled with nuclear programs in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. There could also be Iranian proliferation of nuclear technology to its non-state proxies, such as Hezbollah or Hamas.

'Engagement without Illusions'

There has to be another way. Call it "engagement without illusions." Under this approach, the United States would engage and press Iran at the same time. Iran will see what can be gained by giving up the prospect of nuclear weapons.

At the same time, Iran needs to understand what it stands to lose. In short, the U.S. needs leverage and a unified position. The Europeans, Arabs, Russians and Chinese have long favored direct American engagement with Iran; they now need to make clear what the consequences would be if such engagement failed. Such leverage requires the credible threat, at a minimum, of comprehensive economic sanctions if talks fail. Nothing should be ruled out. Engagement can be a key to the solution or the springboard for tougher measures. The decision will be Iran's.

Given the pace of the Iranian nuclear program, time is of the essence. Diplomacy should be conducted with a sense of urgency, no matter who is in power.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process. \(templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#)

He is coauthor of the just-released [Myths, Illusions and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310\)](#)

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