

# How to Deal with the Challenge from Iran

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In-Depth Reports

**O**n May 12, 2006, Graham Allison and Richard Haass addressed the 2006 Soref Symposium. Dr. Allison is a professor of government and the director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. During the Clinton administration, he served as assistant secretary of defense for policy and plans. Dr. Haass is the president of the Council on Foreign Relations. He served as director of policy planning at the State Department from 2001 to 2003. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

GRAHAM ALLISON

To understand how to deal with the challenge of Iran, one can take a historical analogy, that of the Cuban missile crisis. One of the most remarkable differences between 1962 and today is that whereas in the past information was tightly held, today a careful newspaper reader can know all the relevant facts that are being addressed by the people trying to deal with this complex problem. A second difference is that in 1962 the crisis took place over a mere thirteen days, whereas the Iran crisis will develop over a much longer period. A similarity between the two situations is that in both cases, at the end of the game, the options may be a stark choice between acquiescing to nuclear arms that threaten the United States or launching an attack to prevent this. Faced with this stark choice, it is likely that in the Iranian case, as in the Cuban case, serious consideration will be given at the end to options that looked unthinkable at the start.

The Bush administration's current strategy that it calls the "slow squeeze" is not a strategy for achieving a non-nuclear Iran. The best hope is if the administration were to become persuaded that it would, at the end of the current road, face only two options—acquiesce or attack—then it would become more motivated to explore something outside that box. There are various versions of such a "grand bargain" floating around. Whether there is any offer that could be made to Iran by the United States and the international community that the current Iranian government would accept is uncertain. But it is certainly untested.

There are two questions surrounding the structuring of a grand bargain: One is whether the United States can get over its hesitation to put a bargain on the table; and the other is whether Iran will accept anything short of having nuclear weapons.

It is important for the strategy vis-à-vis Iran to look carefully at the military options. There is a strange argument that many people are attracted to, which is that talking about military options undermines diplomacy. In reality, military capabilities and other forms of hard power are the hand in the glove of diplomacy. Thus, the proposition that no options have been taken off the table is exactly right. The U.S. government has actually tried to discourage the Israeli government from talking about its options here. Instead of discouraging Israel from threatening Iran, it may prove beneficial to do the opposite. Diplomacy is more likely to be successful if the military option seems like a credible threat to Iran. In examining the military options, one must look at all options, and while it is very possible to destroy the known enrichment facilities, for example, the real question is where military action will lead and what the Iranian reaction might be.

RICHARD HAASS

There are essentially four options when dealing with Iran. One is the use of military force, most realistically some version of a preventive—not preemptive—strike. The United States could accomplish a lot but Iran could also retaliate quite a lot, and so no one is particularly anxious to go down that path.

The second option would be to focus on the nature of the regime, but the problem is that the regime simply is not going to change any time soon; hopes to the contrary are based on wishes rather than facts. The Iranian behavior on the nuclear question is far more important than the remote possibility of near-term regime change. The approach to regime change should be implicit, not explicit; there is no need for Congress to enact a highly publicized, \$85 million program.

The third approach, which could be called the North Korea option, is that after years of making complaints and threats, the United States would quietly learn to live with a nuclear Iran without formally acknowledging it. Perhaps deterrence would be appropriate for the concern that Iran might use its weapons, but a much bigger problem is obviously questions of whom Tehran might clandestinely arm.

The least undesirable of the options is diplomacy, that is, trying to negotiate an acceptable outcome. Not only does it avoid some of the negatives of the other paths, but also if the United States is ever going to have to move to more confrontational options, it must be seen to have made every effort at diplomacy. A parallel example would be Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, where the George H.W. Bush administration embraced sanctions, not necessarily because it thought these would work, but because sanctions were a necessary tool of domestic and international political management.

The United States needs to be willing to deal with the Iranians directly. The United States should never be afraid to talk unconditionally with a country like Iran. Diplomacy is not a gift given to others; diplomacy is a tool to advance American national security interests. This also means that the United States should be responding to things like Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's letter. Using the Cuban missile crisis as an analogy, there are multiple letters to respond to, and the response should be not to the letter received but to the letter the United States wishes it had received. It is counterproductive and unnecessary to allow Ahmadinezhad to pose as someone who is more interested in communication and diplomacy than the United States. Because the confrontation is being played out largely in the public domain, Washington needs to appeal to American public opinion, to the international community, and to the Iranian public. This Iranian regime at the end of the day is a minority regime. The United States should design its diplomacy to make clear to the Iranian people the benefits that would accrue to them if their government were to take a responsible stance on the nuclear question, and the penalties that will come their way if their government persists in taking an irresponsible stance.

The United States must ask itself what it is prepared to live with. The uranium enrichment program is not a black or white affair; there are many shades of gray, in terms of size and transparency. The Iranians talk about their rights. If that is going to be an essential element of any diplomatic package, then an interesting question is how to define that right in a way that is enough for the Iranians and not too much for the West.

It is very important to make the distinction between giving a conditional security guarantee and giving a regime guarantee. It is not up to the United States to guarantee the Iranian regime, or any other regime; history will take care of that. Instead, the United States should be talking about the evolution of Iranian society. What the United States can offer is a conditional security guarantee of the form, "If Iran does not attack the United States, the United States will not attack Iran." Just because Iran receives such a security assurance, that will not make it exempt from this administration's general call for movement in the direction of markets and more democratic societies, respect for the rule of law, human rights, and the like.

Calling explicitly for regime change is not smart. It actually strengthens the hand of the regime in Iran because it seems like outside interference. It also makes it more difficult for the United States to garner international support, because this will be used as an argument against American foreign policy. One of the many ironies of U.S. policy toward Iran is that after five years of often explicitly calling for regime change and clearly having a foreign policy toward Iran in which desire for regime change enjoyed priority, the only change in the Iranian regime is that hardliners have increased their power.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Navid Samadani-McQuirk. ❖

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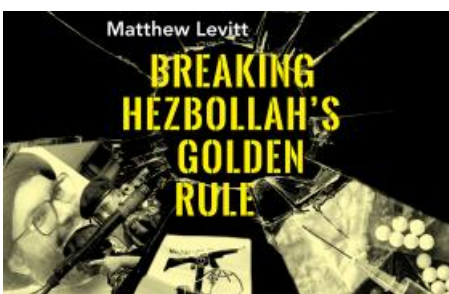
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