



A WASHINGTON INSTITUTE STRATEGIC REPORT



The Red Line

How to Assess Progress in U.S. Iran Policy



PATRICK CLAWSON

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Front cover: An Iranian official holds a capsule of uranium hexafluoride, or UF₆, gas during a ceremony in Mashhad, Iran's holiest city, April 2006. (AP Photo)

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Executive Summary

IN SUMMER 2010, The Washington Institute convened a strategy workshop on U.S. policy toward Iran. Coinciding with a United Nations Security Council vote on new sanctions as well as the first anniversary of Iran's widely rejected presidential election, the multipanel event raised competing ideas about how to assess progress in Washington's approach. In doing so, it highlighted the lack of broad consensus about what the United States is trying to accomplish regarding the multiple strategic challenges posed by the Islamic Republic.

The workshop centered on four main issues, each exposing different facets of the assessment gap. First, two presentations examined the overall state of U.S. Iran policy. The two speakers began from very different starting points and presented largely divergent views about the fundamental objective against which progress should be assessed. The first school of thought views the poor state of bilateral relations as the fundamental problem. Its proponents tend to measure progress by the depth and breadth of U.S. engagement with Tehran, especially in negotiations over the nuclear impasse. Although they do not necessarily expect a transformed relationship, they do seek deep and broad interaction that helps the two countries avoid needless conflicts. The second school of thought views Iran's multiple challenges to U.S. strategic interests as the fundamental problem. Accordingly, its proponents measure progress in terms of how effectively Washington has countered Iranian threats, especially with regard to advancements in the regime's nuclear program.

These two viewpoints on the best means of dealing with Iran—improving bilateral relations or countering the strategic threat—lead to quite different policy conclusions. Nevertheless, the workshop reinforced the belief that U.S. policymakers are unlikely to come down firmly on one side or the other, if only because many in the current administration find much merit in both approaches. Individual policy initiatives will therefore

be evaluated through two sets of lenses, which in many cases will lead to quite different perspectives on the initiatives' worth and impact.

Another key theme of the workshop was the gap in perceptions regarding U.S. and international sanctions against Iran. A panel of three speakers discussed sanctions in their various forms: formal and informal, bilateral and multilateral, targeted and broad. They disagreed on objectives, however, which strongly affected their evaluation of whether the sanctions might succeed. The speakers' remarks and ensuing discussion raised a wide variety of potential objectives, from the highly likely to the largely unattainable. In that order, the proposals included:

- Taking a moral stance against human rights abuses in Iran, modeled on Europe's well-established record of imposing sanctions for such abuses elsewhere
- Dissuading companies and countries from active participation in the Iranian market, based in part on the U.S. Treasury Department's successful "reputational" approach in the international banking sector
- Deterring other countries from taking the same nuclear route as Tehran
- Signaling international disapproval via the Security Council
- Delaying and disrupting Tehran's nuclear and missile programs
- Increasing the Iranian people's discontent with regime policies
- Punishing Tehran or, expressed differently, imposing costs
- Helping the democratic opposition

- Crippling the country by imposing sanctions on its energy sector
- Using sanctions as leverage to open fruitful negotiations
- Halting Tehran's uranium enrichment efforts

In short, the discussion reflected the general state of analysis regarding Iran sanctions: profound disagreement about their objectives, which translates into entirely different assessments of the prospects for success.

Another workshop panel highlighted differing perceptions of Iranian domestic politics. Each of the speakers assumed that support for democracy and human rights is an important U.S. objective, and that the U.S. government could do much to improve the

Washington is bound to fall woefully short when assessed by this standard.

Finally, the workshop's closing discussions highlighted an important limitation in assessments regarding the risk of war between Iran and the United States (or Israel): the tendency to focus on U.S. preemptive strikes rather than the more likely scenario of an Iranian provocation that crosses a U.S. red line. There are many reasons to worry about a U.S.-Iranian military conflict, particularly given the regime's view that the Islamic Republic is on the rise and America on the decline, and the associated view that Washington does not respond when Tehran takes actions that the White House has warned are unacceptable. Accordingly, those who wish to avoid war should focus more on how Washington can reinforce the credibility of its red-line threats, not just on the question of whether it has an acceptable alternative to preemptive attack.

There are many reasons to worry about a U.S.-Iranian military conflict, particularly given the regime's view that the Islamic Republic is on the rise and America on the decline.

prospects for such change. Most of the workshop's other discussants made no such assumption, however. As a result, the panel highlighted the profound policy gap between those who follow Iranian domestic politics (including Iranian politicians) and the bulk of Washington observers.

In Iran, many in both Tehran and the opposition Green Movement seem to have made the dubious assumption that the West holds the key to Iranian political developments, and that its real interest lies in the victory of democratic forces rather than the nuclear issue. In other words, many in both the regime and the opposition will continue to measure the success of U.S. Iran policy by how much the opposition advances and the hardliners retreat—a metric that Washington views as secondary to the nuclear issue. And given the poor prospects that the United States could have much impact on these and other democracy-related issues,

One of the workshop's final presentations—an on-the-record address by Vice Adm. (Ret.) Kevin Cosgriff, former head of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command—assessed the military's role in preparing for and responding to potential Iranian provocations in the Persian Gulf, among other issues.

CONCLUSIONS

The Institute's workshop reflected wider trends in the Iran policy- and opinionmaking communities, where numerous ideas for assessing the U.S. approach continue to compete. This lack of consensus—along with the Obama administration's tendency to focus on the merits of differing approaches—helps explain why analysts and policymakers will likely disagree as they grade U.S. policy in the coming months.

Supporters of the current policy can point to some real successes, emphasizing the progress toward forging

international consensus, delaying Iran's nuclear goals, and taking away the regime's "enemy narrative" about U.S. intentions. Others are more pessimistic, emphasizing how little Iranian actions have changed despite U.S. efforts, and how boldly Iran continues to defy the international community and assert its influence.

Much of the disagreement between the optimists and pessimists centers on the same question: what are the appropriate metrics by which to measure progress?

The gap separating these metrics is unlikely to close; there is little prospect of broad agreement in U.S. policy circles regarding what standards Washington and its allies should adopt for determining success.

If the pessimists are correct, the grave risk is that the United States and Iran are headed toward a test of wills. Such a confrontation would probably become a test of force, most likely initiated when Iran inadvertently crosses a U.S. red line and elicits a furious response.

Introduction

ALTHOUGH MOST OBSERVERS agree that Iran will continue to pose a major policy challenge for the United States, there is little consensus about what would constitute adequate progress in dealing with this challenge. U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic provokes much spirited debate that does not break down along the usual lines of Democrat versus Republican, liberal versus conservative. This disagreement is based in part on the nature and immediacy of the problem, and partly on the degree of influence the United States can expect to wield. Moreover, what some may see as progress, others consider a step back: for example, those who believe Tehran will change course only if pressured externally tend to welcome strong sanctions, while those who believe the only realistic option is successful Iranian opposition efforts tend to see such sanctions as unhelpful.

In summer 2010, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy convened a strategy workshop on U.S. policy toward the country. The event also coincided with the United Nations Security Council vote on new sanctions and took place against the backdrop of the Brazil-Turkey-Iran agreement on fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor—a development that complicated U.S. efforts to secure stronger sanctions. Workshop participants included senior U.S. officials, both current and former, as well as leading scholars and observers of Iran.* This report reflects the insights its author gained from the event.

The workshop focused on four main issues:

- Two presentations assessed the overall state of U.S. Iran policy. The two speakers began from very different starting points and presented largely divergent views about the fundamental objective against which progress should be measured.
- A panel of three speakers discussed sanctions in their various forms: formal and informal, bilateral and multilateral, targeted and broad. They disagreed on objectives, however, which strongly affected their evaluation of whether the sanctions might succeed. Other participants proposed a variety of alternative objectives, some of which will likely be met, and others that are largely unattainable. The discussion reflected the general state of analysis regarding Iran sanctions: profound disagreement about their objectives, which translates into entirely different assessments of their prospects for success.
- Another panel addressed Iranian domestic politics. Each of the speakers assumed that support for democracy and human rights is an important U.S. objective, and that the U.S. government could do much to improve the prospects for such change. Most of the workshop's other discussants made no such assumption, however. As a result, the panel highlighted the profound policy gap between those who follow Iranian domestic politics (including Iranian politicians) and the bulk of Washington observers.
- The final panel examined how much credence Tehran gives to U.S. "red lines," discussing the possibility of the two countries coming to blows if Iran crossed such a line. This approach is very different from the usual scenario, which assumes that such a conflict would be sparked by U.S. preemptive action. The panel followed an address by Vice Adm. (Ret.) Kevin Cosgriff regarding the military's role in preparing for and responding to potential provocations, among other issues. (Unlike the rest of the day's events, his presentation was on the record and is included as an appendix to this report.)

* The workshop was held under the Chatham House rule, which states that "participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed."

THE RED LINE

In short, much of the day's discussion raised competing ideas about how to assess progress in U.S. Iran policy. Accordingly, this report examines two intertwined themes: first, when it comes to Iran, there is no broad

consensus about what the United States is trying to accomplish; second, this factor helps explain why analysts and policymakers will likely disagree on the actual success of U.S. policy.

When it comes to Iran, there is no broad consensus about what the United States is trying to accomplish.

What Objective Should Be Used to Assess Progress?

HOW ONE EVALUATES progress on Iran policy depends on how one assesses the fundamental challenges posed by the Islamic Republic. Currently, policymakers and analysts are split between two very different approaches, one emphasizing the importance of improving U.S.-Iranian relations, the other stressing the strategic threat of current Iranian policies.

■ FIRST APPROACH:

IMPROVE BILATERAL RELATIONS

One view, strongly supported by many professional diplomats, is that the best means of addressing Iranian challenges is to establish a relationship that will allow both sides to communicate about their differences, if not to overcome the mistrust that has persisted for the past thirty years. Such proponents argue that U.S. interests are well served by diplomacy with hostile states. Even during the height of the Cold War, the United States and the USSR saw a mutual interest in continuing communications. In contrast, the United States has no official direct channel to the Iranians. According to this argument, had there been a more regular diplomatic process in place, the American hikers recently detained by Iranian police might have been released in a matter of weeks, and the incident might not have become a major political issue. The episode thus illustrates how, in the absence of a mechanism for addressing differences, new problems will continue to arise. For those who emphasize the importance of improving relations, the real objective is not simply to address current pressing concerns—since tomorrow will bring new problems—but to establish a robust mechanism for airing and addressing differences that will allow for a *modus vivendi*.

Early initiatives by the Obama administration to open communications with the Iranian government were consistent with this approach. In his March 2009 Nowruz message, President Obama stressed the need for a new relationship with Iran. Washington continues to express interest in engagement, despite Iran's

suppression of postelection protests in 2009, and despite the failure of the original engagement offer to yield the response the administration had hoped for.

Those who emphasize the importance of engagement feel that it has brought about a change in tone that could open the door to better communication, and perhaps also to improved relations. They argue that it has had other advantages for U.S. interests as well: the old rhetoric from Tehran painting the U.S. government as the enemy of the Iranian people and of Islam no longer works because Obama has taken away the enemy narrative. This, they believe, played a role in the 2009 explosion of democratic opposition, since hardliners could no longer plausibly appeal for national unity in the face of a hostile foe.

The engagement offer, in this view, has also persuaded peoples and governments around the world that the source of the problem is Tehran, not Washington. Having U.S. allies, especially in Europe, who trust the judgment and leadership of the United States is more important to U.S. interests than progress or lack of it in U.S.-Iran relations. Partisans of this approach emphasize how much Obama's engagement policy has done to cement transatlantic unity about Iran.

Those who emphasize the importance of improving relations express concerns about simultaneously supporting democratic forces inside Iran, as they worry that such support will antagonize Tehran without doing much, if anything, to aid these forces. In fact, many in this camp argue that open U.S. support, even rhetorical, hurts the opposition, and Obama administration policy appeared to reflect these concerns, at least initially.

Indeed, the June 2010 U.S. government sanctions were all framed in terms of their impact on Iran's nuclear program, with barely a reference to human rights. U.S. statements about Iran nearly always include a paragraph about human rights and about Americans imprisoned or missing in Iran, but it is the nuclear program, not these issues, that is the central focus.

Furthermore, U.S. government statements do not reveal Washington's view of the relationship between U.S. policy on the nuclear issue and human rights; they do not answer the question asked by Iranian protestors, "Obama, Obama, are you with them or with us?" Washington has not explained why resolving the nuclear standoff is important for ending Iran's isolation, so resented by Iranian intellectuals, human rights activists, women, and youth. A good argument could be made that so long as the nuclear impasse remains, Iran will be cut off from the world, as Ayatollah Ali Khomeini wants, and that therefore, resolving this dispute is key to achieving increased democracy. But Washington does not make this argument; instead, U.S. government statements relegate concerns about Iranian domestic politics to an afterthought, which should give the Iranian people every reason to think that the United States cares little about democracy in Iran.

■ **SECOND APPROACH:**

REDUCE THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGE

An alternative perspective focuses on Iranian behavior and the wide range of strategic challenges it poses. In this view, Tehran presents four key problems.

First is the regime's support for terrorism and the leading role it plays in arming and funding terrorist groups across the Middle East. Such support creates problems for the United States, Israel, moderate Palestinians, and most of the moderate Arab regimes.

Second, Iran has created obstacles in Iraq and Afghanistan. For a brief moment after the September 11 attacks, Iran assisted the United States in setting up the Afghan government. It is responsible for Hamid Karzai's presidency of Afghanistan, which is at best a mixed blessing. However, with the exception of that initial assistance, Iran has been hindering the U.S.-NATO efforts in Afghanistan and the U.S.-led coalition efforts in Iraq.

The effort at engagement has not yet produced any advance in U.S.-Iran relations, which is a great disappointment to its proponents.

In short, the first school of thought sees the poor state of Washington-Tehran relations as the fundamental problem, and its proponents measure progress by the depth and breadth of U.S. engagement with the Iranian government, especially in negotiations over the nuclear impasse. It is worth emphasizing that they do not necessarily expect a transformed relationship between the two countries, but they do aspire to deep and broad interaction that permits the two sides to avoid needless conflicts.

The effort at engagement has not yet produced any advance in U.S.-Iran relations, which is a great disappointment to its proponents. There are good reasons to question whether any improvement is likely under the current Iranian government, since anti-Americanism is such a hallmark of its ideology. There are also good reasons to question whether improved relations could lead to a satisfactory deal on the nuclear issue and, most important, whether Iran would systematically fulfill any such deal for a sustained period.

U.S. casualties increased in 2004–2006 in no small part due to Iran's support for militant groups.

Third, the oppression of the Iranian people over many decades, but most significantly since June 12, 2009, is a problem for American interests in the region. The United States presents itself as a defender of human rights and democracy. If it is seen not to react when brave protestors take to the streets by the millions, such passivity undercuts its image and can make Middle Easterners skeptical about relying on U.S. promises.

Fourth is the nuclear issue. Iran's race toward nuclear capability is well documented by a respected international agency whose judgments are not tainted by the stains from which U.S. intelligence has suffered. The Western strategy for responding to Iranian stonewalling has not worked, primarily because of the lack of international unity on the issue. The strategy was predicated on significant support from an international coalition larger than merely Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. The assumption was that at

some point, Russia, China, and the Arab states would take the strategy seriously and seek its full implementation. This has not happened.

The biggest problems here are China and Russia. China publicly abides by the three sanctions resolutions that it negotiated with the United States and to which it agreed. But as the European firms have, at the urging of European governments, reduced their activities in Iran, the Chinese have raced in to take advantage of the investment and trade opportunities. China, in fact, has become Iran's largest trade partner since the United States began its attempt to negotiate with Iran and sanction it simultaneously. China has been openly hypocritical about its obligations to the UN Security Council and the United States, as well as to its bilateral relationship with Washington. Russia has been only marginally better, although it has at least thought about Iran in a strategic way. China, on the other hand, tends to see Iran only through the prism of its commercial relationships, weighing the potential for expanded trade with Iran against the possible negative effect on China-U.S. economic relations of a perceived sabotaging of U.S. Iran policy. The Russians live closer to Iran and have much experience with the Islamic Republic, including through the Bushehr nuclear power plant project, and yet they have not provided the West with much help.

Many of those who are chiefly concerned with Iran's strategic challenges believe that because the threat is acute, the United States should make Iran a priority in its relations with a variety of actors. For example, they argue that Iran has to become a central focus for the transatlantic alliance, whose members must together find some way to reinforce the international coalition against the Islamic Republic. The United States and the European Union need to make clear to Russia, China, and the Arab states that their behavior toward Iran will have major consequences for their relationships with the United States and Europe. Western countries have never delivered such a message. The argument from this camp is that Iran is one of the most important foreign and national security challenges to the United States. If Washington cannot communicate a sense of vital urgency and potential consequences, it

may not be possible to establish a definable, workable, and effective coalition capable of convincing the Iranians that negotiations are better than confrontation.

From this perspective, an example of what happens when the Iran issue is put on the back burner is the Turkey-Brazil-Iran tripartite agreement. The rationale for the October 2009 Tehran Research Reactor deal was that it would act as a confidence builder. The deal was seen as a beginning, not a solution; it did not address suspension of enrichment, but it slowed Iran down. By contrast, the 2010 Turkish-Brazilian deal came at the wrong time, on the eve of UN sanctions. It helped Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad by sending him a lifeline; it weakened the sanctions effort at the United Nations; and it weakened the international effort to convince other countries to engage more actively on the issue. It was a political attempt by Turkey and Brazil to "come out" as international powers, and it has been a disaster for them.

Many partisans of the Iran-as-strategic-challenge viewpoint would not close the door to negotiations, if only because the West has little to lose by negotiating. However, they would focus more effort on building up the defensive capabilities of friendly regional states, as well as considering an American security umbrella over them. Additionally, they would keep the threat of force on the table, arguing that while the United States should be cautious about the use of force, it should certainly not exclude it as a future option. There is no consensus, even among those who see Iran as a severe threat to U.S. interests, about the use of preemptive force. Some feel the United States will have to rely on a policy of containment entailing security commitments; a substantial buildup of forces; the drawing of a line in the sand; surrounding Iran with American military power; and a clear sense of what would happen if Iran crosses the line. Others argue that even a hint of containment undermines the credibility of the military force option and removes it as a motivating factor that will encourage the Islamic Republic to slow its uranium enrichment program. In their view, the hardline Iranian leadership takes the United States most seriously when the U.S. position in the Middle East appears strongest.

On one issue, there is growing consensus among many security analysts: if preemptive force is appropriate, the United States should take the lead in the attack, not Israel. The use of Israeli military force against U.S. wishes would be catastrophic for the U.S.-Israel relationship. That said, there is no scenario imaginable in which the United States would use its own forces to disrupt an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.

relations. Of those who support speaking out in favor of democracy and human rights in Iran, some see this as a moral imperative, with little practical implication for U.S. policy on Iran's nuclear program.

In short, the second school of thought sees Iran's multiple challenges to U.S. strategic interests as the fundamental problem, and its proponents therefore measure progress in U.S. Iran policy by how effectively

In principle, partisans of the “strategic threat” view generally advocate speaking out in support of the Iranian opposition, but it is not clear what they mean when they say this.

In principle, partisans of the “strategic threat” view generally advocate speaking out in support of the Iranian opposition, but it is not clear what they mean when they say this. Many analysts do not believe that support for democracy and human rights will present any practical possibilities for diminishing the strategic threats from Iran any time soon. There are numerous differences of opinion among those who emphasize Iran's strategic threat about how much the United States can do to assist democratic forces in Iran. Some argue that U.S. support would be a kiss of death, which is the view generally held by those who emphasize improving U.S.-Iran

the United States has countered Iranian threats, and especially whether Iran's nuclear program is advancing.

The two viewpoints on the best approach for dealing with Iran—improving bilateral relations and countering the strategic threat—lead to quite different policy conclusions. However, it is unlikely that U.S. policymakers will come down firmly on one side or the other, if only because many in the current administration find much merit in both viewpoints. Each particular policy initiative will therefore be evaluated through two sets of lenses, which in many cases will lead to quite different perspectives on whether the policy is worthwhile.

Assessing the Purpose and Impact of Sanctions

MEASURING THE SUCCESS of sanctions requires agreement about their objectives. To determine whether we are making progress, we must know what it is we are trying to achieve. For example, if the primary goal of sanctions is to induce a change in Iranian behavior, then they have been largely ineffective to date. But if the primary goal is to demonstrate international resolve and cohesion while isolating Iran, then sanctions have achieved their desired effect.

U.S. officials have a variety of ideas regarding the purpose of sanctions. Following are some of the most commonly proposed objectives, moving from the least to the most practicable:

■ HALT URANIUM ENRICHMENT

The Obama administration does not necessarily believe that sanctions will halt Iran's uranium enrichment. Many U.S. officials argue that suspension of enrichment is a poor measure of the sanctions' success, and indeed, it is difficult to see circumstances in which the sanctions themselves would lead Iran to halt enrichment. It is much more plausible that the sanctions would be a factor—possibly even a very important factor—in an Iranian decision that the nuclear program has not been worth the political and economic cost and has not brought the expected security and prestige benefits.

■ ENABLE FRUITFUL NEGOTIATIONS

For many in the Obama administration, sanctions are a tool designed to press Iran into opening negotiations. In other words, the objective is engagement, and sanctions are a means to that end. A favorite way to phrase this is that targeted sanctions could create leverage for diplomacy with Iran. Perhaps. But Iran has a track record of using negotiations as a stalling tactic, so that even if it were to reengage with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1), Tehran might be more interested in forestalling tougher action by appearing to be cooperative than in actually resolving differences.

■ CRIPPLE IRAN

One argument is that if the objective is to stop Iran's nuclear program or help the country's pro-democracy Green Movement, then sanctions should go for the jugular: the Iranian energy program. To partisans of this view, U.S. and European unwillingness to target the energy program shows a lack of seriousness about stopping the nuclear program. As one observer put it, the international community will probably impose sanctions that really hurt only after Iran gets a nuclear weapon. Actually, were Iran to test a nuclear weapon, many engagement supporters would say that the country's nuclear status makes engagement all the more important, and they might redouble their opposition to sanctions.

The counterargument is that the United States should not support comprehensive sanctions, such as those against Iraq in the 1990s, because the Iraqi experience showed how problematic they are: they had no impact on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, gutted Iraq's middle class, destroyed Iraqi society, and divided U.S. allies. In this view, the track record for universal and comprehensive sanctions is one unmarred by success, and the seriousness of sanctions should be judged by how effectively they accomplish U.S. objectives without hurting the middle class.

■ HELP THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

Some observers hope that sanctions will help Iran's Green Movement, though neither the UN Security Council nor the Obama administration has focused on this goal in arguing for the current sanctions regime. Some supporters of democracy and human rights actually hope that sanctions will convulse the system, while others take the opposite tack, arguing that sanctions hurt the Iranian people and therefore reinforce the regime's message that the West is hostile to Iran. While the international community and the United States appear unlikely to abandon a gradual approach in favor of shock therapy, it is equally unrealistic to think that

the international community will entirely abandon sanctions. The best that friends of Iranian democracy and human rights can hope for is that some measures against human rights abusers will be added to sanctions designed to press Iran on the nuclear program. This certainly seems to be the approach of the European Union and the U.S. Congress. Interestingly, it seems that the leaders of the Green Movement in Iran have decided not to endorse sanctions, but to attack the regime for causing sanctions to be imposed.

■ IMPOSE COSTS ON IRAN

Sanctions do impose costs on Iran. Yet Iranian leaders express supreme confidence that their valuable oil and gas resources allow the country to prosper no matter how the Western powers view Iranian policies. Furthermore, regime hardliners do not necessarily see integration into the world economy as a good thing. Perhaps more important than the economic pain is the blow to Iran's self-image. It is often said that Iran craves respect and does not want to be seen as a pariah. This may quite possibly be so, but arguably, the international attention devoted to Iran's nuclear program has put the spotlight on the country, portraying it as a major player in regional, if not world, affairs. Therefore, it is not clear how much Iran's leaders see sanctions as a painful punishment.

In addition, the costs inflicted by sanctions are not necessarily that dramatic, especially when sanctions are phased in over time. For instance, the decision of the major international oil companies to end sales of refined petroleum products to Iran does not prevent the Islamic Republic from acquiring gasoline, even though it does raise the cost. Similarly, Iran's decision to shift its foreign exchange holdings out of dollars and into euros, presumably because of the vulnerability of dollar holdings to U.S. pressure, led to losses of several billion dollars, but the Iranian central bank has more than \$70 billion in foreign exchange reserves. The Iranian government has many relatively low-cost alternatives for bearing the higher costs imposed by sanctions; Ahmadinezhad's proposals for phasing out subsidies could generate a great many additional resources. To be sure, Iranians unhappy with the current economic

situation will not be pleased by austerity measures, but then, they have been grumbling about the economy for a long time.

Presumably, punishing Iran is not an end in itself, but a means to change Iranian calculations about whether the nuclear program is worth the cost. Whether this can be accomplished depends in no small part on what Iranian leaders see as the benefit of the program. Do they believe that the West is trying to overthrow them through a velvet revolution and that they defeated such an attempt by their tough response to the 2009–2010 protests? If so, they may conclude that the revolution's future can be secured only by forcing the West to back off, and that a robust nuclear program is the best way to do so. If that is the thinking of the hardliners, they may regard the advantages of a nuclear program as so significant that they outweigh the punishments sanctions impose.

■ INCREASE DOMESTIC DISCONTENT WITH GOVERNMENT POLICIES

For many years, Iranians have been unhappy with government economic policies and corruption, which they see as impediments to growth. The sanctions, and the ability of firms controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to bypass them, only feed the sense of ordinary Iranian businessmen that the government is the source of their problems. Whereas in recent years this discontent had been tempered by expenditures fueled by rapidly rising oil revenue, now the government's oil income is, if anything, shrinking. It seems likely, then, that domestic discontent with the economic situation will increase. It is not entirely clear how sanctions are viewed in the public's evaluation of the country's economic problems. Some governments, such as Cuba, have successfully used sanctions to shift blame to foreign governments for economic failures overwhelmingly due to their own inappropriate policies. But at least so far in Iran, the opposite seems to have occurred: many Iranians blame economic difficulties on the government's hardline positions because they led to international sanctions—though in fact, ending the sanctions would not lead to as much economic improvement as these Iranians seem to expect.

For instance, there is apparently a widespread belief in Iran that the lack of foreign investment in the country's oil and gas industry is a result of the sanctions, whereas the bigger obstacle has been the unattractive business environment, including the poor terms offered to foreign investors.

■ DELAY AND DISRUPT THE NUCLEAR AND MISSILE PROGRAMS

The Iranian nuclear program has encountered technical problems. Although some of them were presumably due to sabotage from Western clandestine operations, others have come from Iran's need to repeatedly reinvent the wheel—that is, to replicate what others long ago perfected. Sanctions have blocked Iranian access to needed technology and equipment, yet some argue that they are not slowing Iran's nuclear

rights abuses facilitates securing approval for sanctions from governments that might otherwise be more reluctant to act. Many in Iran seem to feel that sanctions are good if they visibly hurt those who are hurting the people, for example, the imposition of a ban on travel by Iran's leaders. To the extent that the aim of sanctions is to signal international disapproval of the Islamic Republic's activities, an important measure of whether they are succeeding is how much noise comes out of Tehran complaining about the sanctions.

Ideally, to signal international disapproval, a coalition both broad and deep would need to take swift action. In practice, however, the Security Council's pursuit of unanimity has meant that on average, a year has passed between each successive sanctions resolution, and the resolutions were much weaker than they might have been. There were some real advantages to

International distaste for the regime's human rights abuses facilitates securing approval for sanctions from governments that might otherwise be more reluctant to act.

and missile programs because IRGC-linked firms are working with Chinese suppliers instead of Europeans. That seems to be a significant exaggeration, and Iran continues to devote great effort to obtaining Western technology, which suggests that it is not content to rely on Chinese sources.

■ SIGNAL INTERNATIONAL DISAPPROVAL

Although Iran's leaders may publicly dismiss the sanctions' impact for psychological reasons, they care deeply about these and similar international measures. Sanctions single Tehran out as an international malefactor, in the company of Sudan and, until recently, Libya. This does not correspond with how the regime perceives its role in the world. Furthermore, it could be argued that sanctions show that the international community is hostile to the regime while supportive of the Iranian people. Perhaps a more accurate way of phrasing the point would be that international distaste for the regime's human

the 12-2-1 vote on the June 2010 UN Security Council Resolution 1929 imposing additional sanctions on Iran—with Brazil and Turkey voting no and Lebanon abstaining—in that it showed that not every country in the Security Council has a veto (i.e., the P-5 veto-holders are prepared to push through a resolution over the objections of some nonpermanent members). But that is a silver lining to a black cloud: Security Council action has been so slow and modest that Iran has had ample opportunity to adjust, politically and economically, to the incremental measures.

■ DETER OTHER COUNTRIES FROM TAKING THE SAME ROUTE

Since the Iranian nuclear program interferes with the international community's goal of reinforcing the global nonproliferation regime, one objective of Iran policy is to deter others from taking the same path. Sanctions suggest that resisting cooperation with the

International Atomic Energy Agency is an expensive proposition. Consider North Korea: while international sanctions have not stopped it from developing nuclear weapons, it is hard to imagine many other governments wanting to imitate Pyongyang. A good argument can be made that Iran's nuclear program has exacted a heavy cost for little advantage: after twenty years, Iran is still not nuclear capable, much less in possession of a nuclear weapon, and it has paid quite a price in its relations with Europe. One cynical view is that the world cared little when Iran was just sponsoring terror and oppressing its own people, and that it faced disapproval for these actions only when its nuclear program drew international attention to them.

■ DISSUADE COMPANIES AND COUNTRIES FROM BEING ACTIVE IN THE IRANIAN MARKET

A number of major international firms have pulled out of the Iranian market for political reasons. Pressure to do so comes not only from the U.S. government, but also from European governments and, most important, from the firms' concerns about "reputational risk." The most prominent have been international banks, which have responded to the campaign led by Undersecretary of the Treasury Stuart Levey. The Treasury Department has amassed much evidence about deceptive business practices by Iranian banks, practices that violate regulatory guidelines in many countries and that are also inconsistent with international banks' own codes of "best practice." The department has pointed out to international banks that their reputation may suffer if they are seen as active partners with Iranian banks that are cited in UN, EU, or U.S. sanctions actions as facilitators of Iran's nuclear and missile programs.

The same "informal sanctions" approach that has had so much impact in the banking industry is now spreading to other areas. The U.S. government has been emphasizing deceptive Iranian practices in shipping, which have implications for shipping companies as well as those who insure the ships. A number of industrial firms have been reconsidering their presence in Iran. For instance, Siemens suffered when its products were

perceived as facilitating censorship in Iran. That led not only to a disapproving resolution in the European Parliament, but also to calls to boycott Siemens products by groups such as Stop the Bomb. Similarly, Caterpillar decided to withdraw from the Iranian market after it was targeted by United Against Nuclear Iran, and the French energy company Total decided to halt the sale of gasoline to Iran partly because of the new U.S. law pressing companies to stop such sales, but also because the Iranian market is not lucrative enough to justify facing political pressure and potential legal complications.

■ TAKE A MORAL STANCE AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSERS

Europe has a well-established record of imposing sanctions for human rights abuses even in places where other national security interests are absent, as in Zimbabwe or Burma. Accordingly, the European left sees comprehensive sanctions as an appropriate response to Iran's suppression of peaceful protest. In addition, European media report much more than their American counterparts about Iranian human rights abuses, and European publics are more likely to be sympathetic to sanctions presented as a moral response to these abuses than to sanctions for reasons of national security. Were the Green Movement to take to the streets again, European support for tougher actions against Iran would be strengthened even further.

While there are differing views on the purposes of the sanctions, there is a broad consensus that whatever sanctions are imposed should be vigorously enforced. In recent years, the U.S. government has dramatically stepped up enforcement of its regulations. For example, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control has taken forceful actions that resulted in more than a billion dollars in fines and impressed many in the financial industry. The Justice Department created the post of national coordinator for export enforcement and devoted more resources to sanctions-busting cases; it has brought charges against more than twenty people for the sale of arms or technology to Iran. While these initiatives deserve to be reinforced and extended, the greater challenge is to work with countries that do not have the resources or

the motivation to stop Iranian smuggling of materials covered by the UN sanctions. UN Security Council Resolution 1929 provides mechanisms for improving sanctions enforcement, including a panel of experts to make recommendations and a charge to the committee supervising sanctions to engage more actively. Enforcement efforts will have to be spearheaded by the major Western countries, which alone have the will

analysts do not agree about which are the most important, they have widely divergent ideas about how to measure the impact of the sanctions. These differences would remain even if complete information were available about how the sanctions are affecting the Iranian economy. In the absence of agreement on what the sanctions are meant to achieve, it is difficult to foresee agreement on their usefulness. As CIA

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and resources to make them a priority. These efforts will be more effective if the major Western countries cooperate with each other rather than running separate efforts; joint programs would bring more resources and be politically acceptable in countries that do not want to be seen as bending to U.S. pressure.

In sum, many different objectives have been proposed for the sanctions. Since officials and policy

Director Leon Panetta noted in a June 27 statement, “I think the sanctions will have some impact . . . It could help weaken the regime. It could create some serious economic problems. Will it deter them from their ambitions with regard to nuclear capability? Probably not.” Some will see this as showing that the sanctions adopted to date are insufficient; others, that the sanctions have achieved the right balance.

Assessing How U.S. Policy Affects Iranian Domestic Politics

IRAN'S COMPLICATED DOMESTIC dynamics have placed the United States in an extremely difficult position, with real limits on how far Washington has been willing to go in supporting the opposition movement. Still, when assessing American policy, many opposition and government actors tend to focus on whether perceived U.S. efforts to undermine the regime are succeeding.

Ayatollah Khamenei is wrongly convinced that the West is the key source of a dire threat to his hold on power and that a nuclear deal would only whet the West's appetite for regime change. This belief, which appears to be shared by many Iranian hardliners, does not augur well for engagement or compromise. Many in the democratic opposition criticize the West for excessive focus on the nuclear issue, arguing that the only way to reliably resolve the nuclear impasse is to have a trustworthy government—one controlled by the democratic opposition—that is not implacably hostile to the West. Yet how much the West could do to help the democratic opposition, even if it were so inclined, is by no means clear. Nevertheless, Western leaders should understand that both the Iranian government and the Iranian opposition are convinced—almost certainly falsely—that the West holds the key to domestic Iranian political developments and that its real interest is in the victory of democratic forces. This means that both the Iranian government and the Iranian opposition will measure the success of U.S. Iran policy by how much the opposition advances and the hardliners retreat.

The nuclear issue feeds directly into Khamenei's preoccupation with controlling the domestic opposition movement; he has convinced himself that international pressure against Iran's nuclear policy is but a small tactic in a larger scheme for regime change. In addition, Khamenei believes that without Western support, the Green Movement would not survive. In his view, nuclear progress shows that Iran is powerful and therefore less vulnerable to external pressure, and as external

pressure is relaxed, the internal threat from the opposition will diminish. A recently leaked audio recording provides an excellent insight into Khamenei's view of the relation between foreign powers and the domestic opposition. In Mashhad, a high-ranking intelligence official spoke to clerics, recounting Khamenei's belief that former Iranian president Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who has supported the opposition, communicates with the British MI6 intelligence agency through his son in Geneva. Moreover, Khamenei views opposition as a life-or-death situation, as he has convinced himself that the Green Movement will not stop until it removes him from power. It does not appear that he has any intention of reaching a compromise with the opposition or allowing true democratic institutions to operate in Tehran.

It seems hard to believe that the regime continues to worry about the Green Movement when the opposition is no longer able to bring large numbers of protestors onto the streets of Tehran. But the seriousness with which the government takes the Green threat can be seen in the resources it is devoting to countering it. The government is making an impressive effort, which suggests that it worries that the Greens are an impressive force. Consider its handling of internet use: the government has slowed down access to the point that the internet is now barely usable, and the new Cyber Defense Command Department employs more than four thousand people to monitor email accounts and other daily internet activities. The only reasonable conclusion is that the government is terrified of the opposition, though it is almost certainly overestimating the Greens. Since the protests last summer, the regime has effectively regrouped. To be sure, Khamenei has become more isolated and President Ahmadinezhad's circle continues to decrease, but the division within the Islamic Republic's elite is quite a different matter from the gulf between the regime and much of the educated urban public.

Just as Khamenei is convinced the postelection protests were primarily the work of Western governments

inciting misled Iranians, so is he convinced that the ferocious repression of these protests successfully overcame a challenge that would only have grown had he tried compromise instead. Similarly, Khamenei may believe that the best way to defeat what he sees as yet another Western challenge—on the nuclear issue—is to be equally hardline and defiant. It would be very optimistic to think that he will be looking for an acceptable compromise. For him, the measure of success in U.S.-Iran relations is not likely to be the ability to find a resolution that satisfies both sides; he is more likely to aim for defeating what he sees as a U.S. plot to hold back Iran from its rightful place as a regional and global power.

On one point, both Khamenei and the various strands of the opposition agree: the nuclear issue is not at the top of their agenda. The democratic opposition largely views the nuclear issue as a distraction from the

July 7, 2010, in a very encouraging development, 2009 presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi stated,

Finally and unfortunately, UN Resolution 1929 was adopted. Through rationality and wisdom we could have prevented this resolution and other resolutions from being imposed on us. Why should some few persons, hidden from people's eyes, decide about cases that are tied to the destiny of the country? Were not people supposed to govern their destiny? Why should we think that people agree with everything we decide? Is the [constitutional] article about referendum a formal and luxury article that generates a thunder of insult and accusations [against those who demand referendum] every time it gets mentioned? Isn't it time to ask people's views on sensitive issues and make them a support for significant decisions?" (author's translation).

The seriousness with which the Iranian government takes the Green threat can be seen in the resources it is devoting to countering it.

much more important question of whether Iran has a democratic government. Therefore, it judges U.S. Iran policy by the impact Washington is having on human rights and democracy. This is a problem for the United States, because U.S. policy is not currently aimed primarily at influencing Iran's actions on these issues, nor is Washington likely to have much effect on those matters even if it tried.

The best the United States can hope for from the opposition is that it will point to the nuclear impasse as an example of an Iranian government policy failure. On

In short, the key actors in Iran whom Washington wishes to move—the government and those who could provoke a debate about the wisdom of the nuclear program—are likely to judge U.S. Iran policy in no small part by a metric that the United States regards as secondary to the nuclear issue, namely, how much human rights and democracy improve. Furthermore, the prospects are poor that the United States could have much impact on these issues, which means that when assessed by this standard, Washington is likely to fall woefully short.

Assessing the Risk of War

ASSESSMENTS REGARDING the risk of war between Iran and the United States (or Israel) have generally stemmed from the prospect of a U.S. military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. This is at best an incomplete method, focusing on only one scenario, and not a particularly likely one at that. At the very least, such calculations must factor in the possibility that Iran will initiate the conflict. In other words, the risk of war should be assessed in part by how provocatively Tehran is acting, not solely by the odds that the United States will strike first.

Perhaps Iran would initiate a conflict deliberately, but it seems much more plausible that Iran's overconfidence would lead it to cross a U.S. red line inadvertently. The United States and Iran are entering a period with a heightened potential for such a miscalculation because Tehran perceives that the international order established after World War II, which served to underpin U.S. power, is crumbling, and that a new international balance of power—one more favorable to Iran—is emerging. Accordingly, Tehran sees the United States as a declining power, and Iran as a rising power.

An apt analogy can be made here with the period from 1988 to 1990, following the Iran-Iraq War, when an emboldened Saddam Hussein adopted a more aggressive regional policy that culminated in the invasion of Kuwait. Iraq's growing activism was due to the maturation of its WMD program and the belief that it would soon have nuclear weapons. Saddam, too, talked about the decline of American power, and this led Iraq to overplay its hand. Iran may also overplay its hand, although it is most unlikely that an Iranian miscalculation would take the form of an invasion.

While Iran recognizes its military inferiority, it may not mind a conflict, since it is looking for a moral victory, not a military one. Iran's potential for a moral victory at the expense of a few ships is significant. In 1988, for example, during the last U.S.-Iran military conflict, Iran did not shy away from confrontation. When the United States signaled its route to Iran (by way of the

Swiss) in an effort to prevent a clash, Iran, instead of avoiding the U.S. fleet, laid mines along that very route. Iran has concluded that through stealth, mining, and swarming attacks, it can inflict a small but significant amount of damage on the United States. While U.S. retaliation would be swift and devastating, Iran would see the damage it inflicted as a moral victory.

Additionally, forces within the Iranian military are working to escalate tensions. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) officers may be eager for a fight. It is difficult for the United States to craft a strategy when certain parties in Iran may even welcome limited U.S. strikes for domestic political reasons, calculating that such attacks would rally their power base and give them a free hand to deal with the Green Movement. Furthermore, there are other reasons why some in Iran are eager for a fight. Adm. Ali Fedavi, for instance, a deputy IRGCN commander, apparently desires a confrontation with the United States as part of a personal vendetta over a previous battle with U.S. naval forces during the latter phases of the Iran-Iraq War.

The decentralized operational command system of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and IRGCN further increases Iran's propensity for violent confrontation. Such decentralization makes it difficult for Iran's political and military leaders to control the escalation of crises, as calling off attack orders can prove challenging. In addition, IRGC and IRGCN officers are often rewarded for taking aggressive action against enemies. Iran's talent for self-deception should not be underestimated. There is an insular aspect to the IRGC that makes it sometimes believe its own propaganda and encourages confrontation with the U.S. military.

Another reason Iran may miscalculate is that the United States has arguably been passive in dealing with Iranian provocations, such as mock attacks on U.S. ships and simulated mine attacks. Iran has sponsored numerous acts of terrorism against the United States since 1983 without engendering a military response. It

continues to push the United States and interprets the lack of response as a sign of weakness. Although the United States detained a number of IRGC personnel providing support to violent extremist groups in Iraq and Afghanistan who targeted U.S. forces, it still has not taken military action. From Iran's perspective, a whole series of U.S. red lines became pink when Iran actually crossed the line. Iran's leaders may calculate that this process will be repeated endlessly. We cannot be certain how the United States would react if Iran started producing highly enriched uranium. During the 1980s, the United States did not shy away from "getting in Iran's face" to curtail Iranian actions, which made the Iranians feel as though the United States was always watching them. This kind of pressure reduced the risk of war.

during Operation Desert Fox that it struck targets that could tangibly affect the stability of the Iraqi regime. Moreover, because the United States has generally ensured that military actions were proportionate, the Iranian regime could calculate that American military action would not threaten its survival.

The Iranian nuclear dilemma is emblematic of a problem democracies face when dealing with challenges. Until the September 11 attacks, the United States did not devote the necessary resources to al-Qaeda; after the attack, the entire calculus changed. Similarly, Israel's 2006 war with Hizballah was sparked by the kidnapping of soldiers, yet there had been five kidnapping attempts in the previous eight months, and only after the kidnappings were successful did Israel's approach change. From the muted

It is difficult to craft a deterrence strategy against a government whose members may welcome limited U.S. strikes for domestic political reasons.

Iran may also correctly calculate that the U.S. military is not necessarily well prepared for limited conflict, as it has focused almost exclusively on counter-insurgency and stability operations in the past decade. As a result, the knowledge base and institutional memories in the Defense Department about how to engage in limited conflict—as the United States did in Iraq in the 1990s—have atrophied. This lack of recent experience in conducting limited conflict, coupled with the fact that the U.S. Navy has not been seriously tested in more than sixty years, raises further questions about U.S. competence to contain and deter Iran.

In addition, Iran may also count on U.S. allies and the U.S. policy of proportionality to constrain military actions by the United States. For example, because in the late 1990s U.S. allies often did not permit the United States to use air bases in the Persian Gulf to strike Iraq, the United States was forced to rely on desultory cruise missile strikes. It was only

U.S. response to the loss of hundreds of soldiers from improvised explosive devices supplied by Iran to Iraqi insurgents, Tehran may calculate that it can challenge the United States without fear of the consequences. That may lead Iran to push and push until the U.S. president says, "no longer."

It is difficult to craft a deterrence strategy against a government whose members may welcome limited U.S. strikes for domestic political reasons. One solution would be to convince the adversary that a conflict would not remain limited and that the United States would no longer maintain its traditional policy of proportionality. Under current conditions, however, such U.S. warnings might not be credible.

In short, there are many reasons to worry about a military conflict between the United States and Iran; a potential U.S. military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities is hardly the only issue. Indeed, a major consideration is the Iranian view that the Islamic Republic is on the rise and the United States on the decline, and

THE RED LINE

the associated view that the United States does not respond when Iran takes action that Washington has warned would be unacceptable. Those who wish to avoid an U.S.-Iran military conflict should be at least as concerned with how Washington can reinforce

the credibility of its red-line threats as they are with whether the United States has an acceptable alternative to a preemptive strike. The most important question for assessing whether a military clash is coming is this: how likely is Iran to overstep U.S. red lines?

Much of the disagreement between the optimists and pessimists centers on the same question: what are the appropriate metrics by which to measure progress?

Conclusion

THE UNITED STATES FACES many challenges and few opportunities in its policy toward Iran. There is little consensus about what U.S. aims should be or how much progress Washington can reasonably expect to make. Supporters of the current policy can point to some real successes, emphasizing the progress toward forging international consensus, delaying Iran's nuclear goals, and taking away the regime's "enemy narrative" about U.S. intentions. Others are more pessimistic, emphasizing how little Iranian actions have changed despite U.S. efforts, and how boldly Iran continues to defy the international community and assert its influence.

Much of the disagreement between the optimists and pessimists centers on the same question: what are the appropriate metrics by which to measure progress? The gap separating these metrics is unlikely to close; there is little prospect of broad agreement in U.S. policy circles regarding what standards Washington and its allies should adopt for determining success.

If the pessimists are correct, the grave risk is that the United States and Iran are heading toward a test of wills. Such a confrontation would probably become a test of force, most likely initiated when Iran inadvertently crosses a U.S. red line and elicits a furious response.

Appendix: Context and Considerations for Responding to Iranian Behavior

By Vice Adm. Kevin Cosgriff, U.S. NAVY (Ret.)

IN FORMULATING A STRATEGY toward an Iran which seems determined to play a destabilizing role in the region, the United States must first decide what it is attempting to accomplish: a nuclear-weapons-free Iran? Regime change? Or some other goal? Only after setting realistic goals can it hope to formulate an appropriate matching strategy.

In developing a U.S. strategy for Iran, there are four major realities Washington must confront: first, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) believes that its revolutionary ideology takes precedence over international norms; second, Tehran cannot abide the U.S. role in the region, which it believes is the main obstacle to its hegemonic aspirations; third, although riven by internal divisions, the IRI has acted fairly consistently in accordance with the above beliefs; and fourth, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has become ever more powerful, to the point that the regime's survival and perhaps control are in its hands. This last point, in particular, will greatly complicate U.S. efforts to deal effectively with Iran.

Because of these realities, the United States must actively seek to contain and isolate the Islamic Republic; unfortunately, that means containing the country as a whole. This is not to suggest a radical change in U.S. policy; it does mean, however, that Washington must move from occasional ad hoc, piecemeal responses toward a more systemic approach.

To this end, a sustainable and realistic strategy might usefully incorporate several elements:

- A general respect for Iranian sovereignty and territory. This includes regular, direct communications with the regime (where appropriate).
- A credible and persistent diplomatic and military deterrent posture to counter Iranian propaganda and malign military and irregular warfare activities. This

includes steps to protect the interests of the United States, its friends, and the international community.

- A consistently firm, and potentially forceful, response to any hostile acts or threats against vital interests of the United States and its regional friends.
- A tough ongoing sanctions program that targets, inter alia, Iranian nuclear and missile programs, all entities supporting international terror, and the commercial interests of the IRGC.
- An uninterrupted and unfiltered international information flow to the Iranian people.

The United States will be dealing with a troublesome Iran for the foreseeable future, and there is little reason to believe the regime's demise will come about soon. As a result, there is a danger that the international community will soon tire of the "Iranian problem" and that countries will choose to overlook the challenge to international stability it poses, in favor of the pursuit of narrow economic or other interests, as is already occurring with China.

Thus, for the U.S. strategy to succeed, it must continue to isolate and sanction the regime until the latter changes its behavior and policies and meet Iranian challenges with a firm response at the time, place, and manner that Washington sees fit.

NAVCENT'S APPROACH

During my time at the helm of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), missions and forces were assigned along three principal lines of operation: (1) maritime security—involving coalition forces—to deny terrorists use of the sea by directly foiling their plans or supporting activities (such as drug and weapons smuggling); (2) confronting violent extremism—involving mainly U.S. naval forces—by supporting combat operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and

elsewhere; (3) countering Iran—involving mainly U.S. naval forces—to deter bad behavior.

NAVCENT sought to leverage the power and flexibility of maritime forces as a visible reminder to Tehran of our ability to respond to aggression. NAVCENT, however, avoided being provocative, and always acted with “disciplined restraint.” And while Tehran respects strength, it detests the United States for being strong (but ironically may despise it for not using force when such a response is called for . . . to not act forcefully in such cases is to undermine U.S. credibility in the eyes of friend and foe alike).

In assessing possible military responses, it is important to take a broad view. Military action does not necessarily entail combat. For example, much thought should be devoted to the movement and employment of the Fifth Fleet’s ships and aircraft, especially aircraft carriers and amphibious ships, in the belief that their relative transparency could be used to reinforce certain Iranian perceptions of U.S. intentions. Conversely, ambiguity could be created if that were called for. This is not unique to naval forces, but the sea does allow for operational maneuver in useful ways.

NAVCENT crafted a modest strategic communication plan as part of our lines of operation, consisting of “lines of persuasion”:

- The positioning of ships, and conveying (or concealing) where they were and what they were up to as the most powerful form of communication.
- A proactive public affairs plan intended for Arab friends and external audiences, but which we knew would be visible within Iran.
- Engagement of regional military and civilian leaders through visits, conferences, and briefings, and generally also keeping U.S. embassies apprised of routine and nonroutine situations and soliciting them for advice.

Being somewhat transparent works to the advantage of the United States in that it makes it easier to be ambiguous when that is called for. Appearing less belligerent

was reassuring to our friends, and it was always possible to ratchet up from this stance—though the next step, the use of force, requires much greater care. Likewise, great care is needed to build de-escalatory options into most plans as the situation warrants. In general, the goal is to influence behavior while avoiding major combat.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

The United States has had several occasions to engage in contingency planning in response to Iranian activities. Sometimes these efforts involve only the U.S. Navy, although they usually involve other Central Command (CENTCOM) components. The good news is that the United States has sufficient military power in place in the Gulf to accomplish what is required while maintaining capability to meet U.S. military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. And it was not always easy to correctly perceive how U.S. messages were being received by the IRI regime, average Iranians, and other peoples in the region.

At a practical level, then, some key attributes the military might consider in any contingency planning include the following:

- Any action must be framed by a communication narrative, as it were, mindful that the United States was not only sending a message to the regime in Tehran, but also to average Iranians, regional allies, and the international community. For instance, in this vein, risk to civilians must be kept to a minimum.
- The United States should be prepared to respond very quickly while undertaking vigorous diplomacy.
- Responses should generally be directed to the source of the provocation.
- Asymmetric responses are appropriate if they have the potential to yield significantly improved outcomes.

This last factor is of particular importance. For instance, suppose the United States were to impose an inspection regime against all Iranian-flagged merchant

ships to make sure sanctioned material is not being transferred in response to some provocation elsewhere. Such actions would pose some real diplomatic and operational challenges but would play to U.S. strengths and Iranian weaknesses. Such operations would disrupt the rhythm of shipping companies with IRGC connections and cost Iran time and money, and they could be used to foreshadow more serious additional actions (for instance, up to and including a blockade).

One can consider other possible options, but the salient point is the use of asymmetric advantages focused upon highly valued (or potentially highly threatening) Iranian capabilities in a more or less “vertical” fashion may yield especially impactful results in stopping bad behavior.

CONCLUSION

The United States needs a clear-eyed view of the problem posed by the IRI and a strategy tailored to the realities it faces. This translates into the need for a long-term approach. The United States must remain engaged with the UN and with other countries, while recognizing the limits and staying power of these other actors. And it needs to be realistic about what it is trying to accomplish, while remaining ready to back up its words with actions on a sustained and systemic basis. To this end, the U.S. military posture in the Gulf and the signals the United States sends through its activities there can play a useful role in deterring an Iran committed to destabilizing the region while at the same time reassuring its friends.

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How one evaluates progress on Iran policy depends on how one assesses the fundamental challenges posed by the Islamic Republic.

